

PERRY RHODAN



THE WORLD'S GREATEST SPACE FICTION SERIES



THE BONDS OF ETERNITY

Clark Darlton

#77

Perry Rhodan

No. 77

The Bonds of Eternity

*The spirit of an Earthly Man - in the Body
of a Monster from the Stars . . .*

Clark Darlton

1000 Spaceships. Mostly 'manned' by robots. Battling for supremacy in the overlapping area before the border zone between Einstein Space and the Druuf Universe.

A conflict of cosmic proportions—and Perry Rhodan plays a dual role between them.

And someone—the ghost of a Terran in the body of a monster from the stars—is helping the Administrator of the Solar Empire as the gigantic battle seesaws back and forth, first the Robot Regent of Arkon penetrating the alien universe, then the Druuf ships invading Einstein Space.

Galactic powers, straining to break – THE BONDS OF ETERNITY

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were created by Walter Ernsting and Karl-Herbert Scheer.

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YOU'RE ADVENTURE BOUND WITH —

Perry Rhodan – Roamer of the Space Realms in the Interests of Peace

Atlan – The Wanderer through Eternity speaks through the mouth of Time's Lonely One

Onot/Ellert – A single body containing 2 completely different personalities

Harno – A mysterious being of energy & time

Pucky – The Mutant Mousebeaver

Atlan D. Mercant – Chief of the Solar Intelligence Service

Tommy-1 – Spokesman for the Druufs,

Capt. Marcel Rous and **Lt. Potkin** – In charge of the base on the planet Hades

Lt. David Stern – Chief radio officer of the *DRUSUS*

Sgt. Stootz – On duty at the Alarm Centre of Terrania

Dr. Haggard – Spaceship physician

John Marshall – Mutant Corps esper

Gorx – Sole inhabitant of the planet Gorx

AN EPISODE THAT'S BOUND TO PLEASE

1.

GO TO HADES!

The planet was 6500 light-years from Earth and it resembled Mercury in some respects such as its gravity which was no more than 0.35G and the characteristic of turning the same hemisphere to the central sun. This created the icy half of night and the super-heated side of day. The extremes of cold as in outer space and burning heat on the glaring surface were separated only by an 80-kilometre-wide twilight zone which was ravaged by incredible storms.

One look at the sun dispelled any similarity to Mercury. Siamed was a twin star. The glowing red main star was circled by a, green companion and around the center of gravity of these 2 suns rotated 62 planets with a multitude of moons some of which had moons of their own.

One of these planets resembled Mercury. It was Hades and it harbored human life although its surface was forbidding and inhospitable and a tremendous distance separated its men from their home on Terra.

Secretly and hidden far below the surface, powerful energy-beamers had carved huge caves out of the rock. The receiver station of the matter-transmitter spewed out a steady stream of materiel and weapons needed for reinforcements.

Deep inside the planet Hades a military base was created for Perry Rhodan. This planet was less than a light-hour away from the world of his most intransigent enemies. Hades was the 13th planet of the twin-star system Siamed whose 16th planet was called Druufon.

Druufon, the power center of the Druufs!

* * * *

Perry Rhodan looked with an enigmatic expression at the observation screen which revealed the surface above their subterranean abode. He stood in the control center of the base. Somewhere in the background hummed the generators which supplied the necessary energy for the climatizer. The air in the circular room was fresh but not too cool. The smooth metallic floor vibrated very faintly. Farther below in the rock were the workshops of the Swoons. The microtechnicians worked indefatigably on the electronic shield installations. They surrounded the planet with an invisible 5-

dimensional cordon which could not be penetrated by disturbances of the time-space continuum and thus made detection by the Druufs impossible. The matter-transmitter also emitted some telltale echoes which now were intercepted and absorbed by the net.

"I'm aware how agonizing it must be for you, Atlan," Rhodan finally said slowly. "You're concerned over the possibility that the Druufs might become too strong if we don't intervene, if we continue to allow them to destroy the ships of Arkon which attack them. No, please don't say anything yet! Let me finish first, Atlan. The Robot Regent of Arkon, our old friend who refuses to deviate from his set course, is suffering setback after setback. He's continually sending out emergency signals, pleading for our help. Up to now we've ignored his calls for help and let him fight the battle against the Druufs alone. For tactical reasons, Admiral! Another month or two and Arkon will be so weakened that the Druufs can swamp the Arkonide Empire and our Galaxy as well."

The immortal Atlan stood a little farther back, leaning against the wall. He held his arms crossed over his chest and looked into Rhodan's cool grey eyes in which suddenly a smile began to flicker. The 10,000-year-old Arkonide from a dynasty of rulers that vanished ages ago was disturbed by the calmness of Rhodan. "You're going too far with your game of tactics," he replied in a measured and urgent tone. "I admire the ability of the Terranians to cope with all situations but I'm afraid you underestimate the Druufs. Some day they'll find a way to break the rule of the Regent . . ."

"It means they would take care of the job for us," Rhodan broke in, grinning openly. "But your apprehension is unfounded. I'd never let it come to that. If the Druufs try to leave their own space to penetrate the Galaxy they can do it only through the transition funnel which exists between their time-plane and ours and which moves at 50% speed through the Galaxy – who knows how much longer? But Arkon has sent an armada to guard this gap in the universe and it does the work for us too. This leads to the incontestable conclusion that both the Druufs and the robot-fleet of Arkon are doing a yeoman's service for us. What more do you want?"

"You must not weaken the Regent excessively," Atlan warned. "The Druufs are much more vicious enemies of ours!"

He was perfectly right and Rhodan knew it. Yet when the opportunity occurred and the transition through a split between the two world systems could be accomplished without special technical means, Rhodan decided to sit tight as the warships of the Druufs and the Arkonides clashed with each other. Terra's battlefleet waited unnoticed by the adversaries and Rhodan

simply watched how they pummeled one another.

“We’ll soon have to respond to the Regent’s request for assistance,” Rhodan said.

Atlan sighed with relief. “If we support Arkon in its fight with the transgressors, the Robot Brain that rules Arkon won’t be able to deny us an honest defense treaty. Together we can defeat the Druufs.”

Rhodan gave no answer. He glanced at the door through which a man entered. He wore the pale-green uniform of the Solar Imperium’s Spacefleet. “Sir, the *DRUSUS* is ready to start,” he reported.

“Very good, Lt. Potkin,” Rhodan acknowledged. “I’ll take off with Atlan and several mutants on a reconnaissance flight to Druufon. We’ll be back in a few hours.” Then with a brief glance at Atlan: “Coming, Admiral?”

Atlan had held the rank of an admiral in the Arkonide spacefleet 10,000 years ago before he attained immortality and retreated from time to time to a pressure sphere at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to await the era when mankind reached the stage of reaching for the stars. He had allied himself with Rhodan when he learned that the Galactic Empire was no longer ruled by true Arkonides but by a gigantic robot-brain.

“I’m ready!” Atlan responded.

* * * *

The *DRUSUS*, a spherical spaceship measuring 1½ kilometers in diameter, glided out of the subterranean hangar and raced up into the black sky of Hades. Due to the thin atmosphere the twin suns and stars were shining simultaneously. Storms of unbelievable force swept wildly across the rugged landscape, seeking to equalize the pressure differential between the two hostile hemispheres of the planet.

Lt.-Col. Sikerman sat rigidly at the controls of the gigantic ship and steered it firmly out into space following the computed course of transition. They wanted to reach the immediate vicinity of Druufon in a short jump.

The flight didn’t merely serve the purpose of reconnaissance. Rhodan’s main intention was to make an attempt to establish contact again with the unknown helper who lived among the Druufs without being one of them.

It had been a very strange story. Their brains had received telepathic impulses when they visited Druufon. There was no doubt that they came from the body of a Druuf. But this particular Druuf, the chief physicist of his race, knew nothing about it. So there had to be two psyches in his body.

The mousebeaver Pucky, Rhodan's most efficient para, had faced the Druuf and tried to solve the secret but had failed. Even the energy being from the Tatlira system that had been discovered by Sgt. Harnahan 60 years ago could offer no explanation.

I don't know who I am, the mysterious helper had signaled. But I know you, Perry Rhodan! I have no body and have wandered since, time immemorial from world to world and from race to race to find what I lost years or thousands of years ago. I have seen the beginning of time and witnessed the horror of the final end. All suns burned out and extinguished. And with them life extinguished too . . .

"How do you know me?" Rhodan had asked.

I don't know – I don't know!

And then all thought-impulses ceased abruptly and the attempts to make contact again failed after one last warning: *Leave the system of the Druufs! I'll get in touch with you again . . .*

Rhodan fell silent when they later discussed who the mysterious being that had talked to them by telepathy might be. He knew there was no answer.

Rhodan kept his own guess carefully to himself because it was more than fantastic. It bordered on sheer madness.

Sikerman, Commander of the *DRUSUS*, announced undeterred: "Transition in 10 seconds, sir."

Nobody answered. Rhodan looked at the observation screen where the planet Druufon would emerge after the hyperjump. It was a world twice the size of Earth with a breathable atmosphere and a gravity nearly double Terra's magnitude. There were 21 moons circling Druufon.

Transition and Druufon!

The planet was less than a light-minute away. The *DRUSUS* quickly reduced its velocity and went into orbit around Druufon, relying on its protective screen to ward off any attack by the Druufs.

But the Druufs had other troubles to worry about. They were busy repulsing the persistent attacks by the Robot Regent of Arkon, which had become weaker but never stopped. Fewer and fewer robotships succeeded in running the blockade of the Druufs' time-plane and most were destroyed by the defenders.

The *DRUSUS* followed its course unnoticed. And if it was noticed, it remained unmolested since the Druufs knew that Rhodan's ship would not attack them.

Pucky lolled on the couch in the Command Centre. He sat on his hindlegs with his back against the wall, his wide beavertail resting at his side. His eyes were half-closed and he listened inwardly. Nobody disturbed him because they all knew he was trying to make telepathic contact with the unknown helper.

Harno, the spherical being from Tatlira, hovered at the ceiling. His amazing capabilities forever posed new puzzles and nobody had made an adequate effort to solve them. Harno, who had adopted that name in memory of his first human friend Sgt. Harnahan, was a 5-million-year old being that – according to his explanation – consisted of time and energy. He communicated by telepathy and acted as a televisor. He was able to depict each spot of the universe of his spherical surface.

Rhodan shook off the pain which every transition caused. He gazed pensively at Atlan, who sat together with the telepath John Marshall at the other side of the Command Centre and watched the observation screen too.

“Harno, can you see Onot?”

Onot was the name of the chief physicist in whose body the unknown helper lived. The answer came in the form of silent impulses which could also be understood by non-telepaths: *I see Onot. But he thinks like Onot.*

“Show him to us,” Rhodan told him.

Harno, up to now a black ball the size of an apple, slowly floated lower and grew larger till he reached a diameter of ½ meter. But not only his size but also his color changed. Instead of the faint sheen of his black surface it now shimmered milky white like a picture screen.

Colorful reflexes suddenly flitted across the screen and began to form a clear picture. It showed what was taking place one light-minute away.

Several Druufs moved slowly and clumsily back and forth between huge technical installations. The generators and other aggregates formed regular corridors in the large hall which – as Rhodan knew – was located deep inside the planet Druufon.

The Druufs were ungainly creatures and they seemed to move only at half-speed. Yet their motions appeared to be quite natural in their own time-plane. They were almost 3 meters tall, had spherical heads with 4 eyes and a triangular mouth. They had neither ears nor noses and lacked hair as well. Their leathery skin was smooth and seemed to be thick. They communicated with each other by organic transmitters and receivers. By using complicated translators it was possible to conduct conversations between the Druufs and the Terrans.

The Druufs in Harno's picture apparently were engaged in an important task. They followed the instructions of a particularly robust specimen who stood on a raised platform before a switch panel from where he gave his directions.

"What's going on?" Rhodan inquired.

"I can't quite figure it out," Pucky answered, "but I know the instrument which they're manipulating. It's a generator which produces the time-freezing field. It'll be their most formidable weapon – once they can put it into action."

"The time-freezer . . .!" Rhodan contemplated. "It's still in the developing stage and can't influence the present situation decisively. That's why I'm against destroying it. Who knows how we can benefit from it ourselves?"

Pucky concentrated his mind again in his effort to receive the thoughts of the distant Druufs. Without his knowledge Harno helped him with the job by reinforcing the incoming impulses.

"They're about to perform crucial experiments. These Druufs are all scientists and don't pay attention to the daily life on the surface and in the realm of their system. They're concerned with different matters although they're aware that their work serves military purposes. However they know no other way to satisfy their scientific curiosity."

"This is a very familiar alibi," Atlan murmured in the background. "Wasn't this the favorite excuse of your first atomic scientists too, barbarian?"

"You're right, Admiral," Rhodan admitted. "However if I judge this matter correctly, this attitude is less objectionable than that of scientists who openly admit to work only for war because the results of their research can have no other purpose."

"That's just the way it is on Arkon," Atlan agreed, conceding defeat. "I'm inclined to believe you're right."

"That stout Druuf is Onot," Pucky revealed. "I can read his thoughts clearly. But he thinks only about his invention and is therefore not identical with our friend at the moment."

"That's what I was afraid of," Rhodan replied. "However I must confess I held some hope that the irradiation of the time-field would have some effect. Unfortunately this doesn't seem to be the case."

The heretofore taciturn Lt.-Col. Sikerman was about to say something when he was distracted by the blinking of a red lamp. He mechanically reached for the switch to make connection with the radio center.

The voice of Lt. David Stern, Chief Radio Officer of the *DRUSUS* on this mission, came through. "A secret message for Perry Rhodan, sir. By hyper-radio in code."

Sikerman stared for a moment hesitantly at the loudspeaker and the red light before turning his head toward Rhodan. His face was a question mark. Rhodan perked up in his seat. His hand moved next to Sikerman's and depressed a button. "Lt. Stern, take the message down on tape! Don't try to decode it. I'll be there in a minute. OK?"

"Yes sir," came the reply in a tone which clearly revealed Lt. Stern's lack of understanding.

Pucky looked at Rhodan. "What do they want?" The mousebeaver knew that the hyper-radio message could only come from Grautier – the stronghold which was 22 light-years away – or from Terra. "I'm really curious about it."

Rhodan was also wondering but he didn't show it. "Keep an eye on Onot," he said to Pucky, Harno and Marshall. Then he turned to Atlan and added: "I'll go and find out what it's all about."

Atlan slumped back in his chair. The implied hint to stay behind was too obvious to be overlooked. He followed Rhodan with his eyes. *Did Rhodan expect a message?*

About a fortnight ago Rhodan had dropped some remark in a reference to the mysterious ally who lived in a Druuf. This restless soul – or whatever it was – vexed Atlan considerably. At any rate it had aroused his burning interest.

What exactly was it that Rhodan had said at the time? *I believe I know who our friend is . . .*

Atlan pondered this remark a long time. Whom could Rhodan have meant? There was nobody in the Mutant Corps who had roamed – incorporeal – for thousands of years through eternity. He was not aware that anyone was missing.

Atlan's anxiety grew more and more so that he was unable to concentrate on the more important business at hand. Harno had become smaller and black again. He slowly ascended to the ceiling where he remained waiting further developments.

Pucky kept monitoring Onot but he simultaneously followed Rhodan who entered the radio room and began to talk with David Stern. But then Rhodan's thought impulses were suddenly interrupted. He had shielded his

mind because he expected Pucky to listen in.

The mousebeaver grunted in disappointment. He concentrated his mind again on the Druufs and consoled himself, that he would learn soon enough what Rhodan's titillating news was about.

After 5 minutes Rhodan returned to the Command Centre. His face looked thoughtful and there was a strange shimmer in his grey eyes. He acted evasive when Atlan sought his gaze.

But Pucky asked a direct question: "What kind of a message did you receive? Did it come from Grautier?"

Rhodan shook his head but gave no answer.

"So it must've come from Earth."

Rhodan nodded.

"Is something wrong?" Pucky persisted, vainly trying to pierce Rhodan's thought-block.

"You might as well give up trying so hard, Pucky," Rhodan shook his head. "You'll never find anything out that way if I don't want to. The message was in a code which is unknown to anyone but myself – and of course to our man Mercant at the other end of the hyper-radio on Terra."

"Mercant?" Pucky puffed, surprised. Allan D. Mercant was the counter-intelligence chief of the Solar Security Service. When he sent a message it must be of serious importance and if Rhodan didn't want to talk about it he probably had good reasons.

Rhodan glanced at the observation screen, which still showed the planet Druufon. "No more news from the unknown, Pucky?"

Pucky replied a little peeved: "Not a word from our ghostly friend. It seems that he doesn't want to bother with us anymore or he would've spoken up again."

"Nobody can be in 2 places at the same time," Rhodan murmured, and touched Sikerman on the shoulder. "Set course for Hades, Commander! We'll jump from there to Grautier and make a little detour. Atlan, Pucky and Harno will accompany me."

Atlan looked at John Marshall before he walked over to Rhodan and remonstrated: "Don't you think you're overdoing your secretive act? Don't we have a right to share all important knowledge with you?"

Rhodan was startled. Suddenly a smile flitted over his face and disappeared again the same instant. "Of course you're entitled to it but I didn't want to bother you with pure conjectures. Mercant's message has merely

heightened my surmise and I've got to go back to Earth. Something has happened there that nobody expected yet to occur."

They looked at him with undisguised impatience.

"What?" Pucky inquired.

"Atlan doesn't know the whole story and he wouldn't be able to understand it all, Pucky. In order to understand what's involved I have to go far back in the past to a time when he was still waiting at the bottom of the ocean and hoping for better times. That's when it all started."

"At that time," Pucky replied, "I wasn't yet on Earth myself and didn't know you either."

Rhodan nodded. He had almost forgotten it. "One more reason to clear up the situation for you. I'll tell you the exact story on our way to Earth. Sikerman, first to Hades! We still have some unfinished business there. Bell will stay behind as my deputy."

"That'll make him sore," Pucky drooled hopefully.

"Maybe not!" Rhodan said dryly as the *DRUSUS* veered from its circular path around Druufon and headed for Hades. "In fact I'm sure it won't make him a bit sore. Bell is afraid of ghosts and we're going to Earth to meet a ghost."

Pucky stared at Rhodan and then closed his eyes as if he wanted to sleep. He knew that he couldn't get any more out of Rhodan.

Atlan remained silent. He also realized that it was useless to pressure Rhodan for more information at this time but he had a hunch that the invisible helper on Druufon had some connection with the 'ghost'.

* * * *

A little time later the *DRUSUS* raced through the gap which separated them from their universe. First they broke through the Druufs' line of ships blocking the approach and ignored the radio signals ordering them to turn back. Then they ran into the fighting ships of the Regent. Again Rhodan disregarded their warning signals and pushed through the robotships. A few energy shots blasted the protective screen of the *DRUSUS* and then the vessel went into transition. The stars and the ships of the Robot Regent disappeared.

Only the stars came back but then the *DRUSUS* was already 22 light-years away from the scene. The vessel touched down on the 7th planet of the Myrtha system, also known as Grautier. But it stayed only a few hours.

Then Rhodan took off again – this time on course for Terra.

And as they approached the speed of light, Rhodan began to relate his story, bringing the past into the present as Atlan and Pucky listened breathlessly.

It was such a fantastic tale that the listeners skipped a few heartbeats.

Harno, the strange being from space and time, hovered at the ceiling and followed Rhodan's account . . .

2.

THE BODILESS TIME TRAVELLER

It was in the earliest days of the New Power from which later the Solar Imperium was born, about 70 years ago.

Perry Rhodan was in the process of forming his Mutant Corps. Everywhere on Earth where atomic explosions had taken place genetic changes of newly born children occurred and produced people with unprecedented attributes. They created telepaths, telekins, teleporters, seers and hypnos.

Among them was a man by the name of Ernst Ellert. Ellert was a mutant whose ability surpassed anything human imagination could conceive. While his body rested, his mind could leave his recumbent body and venture into the unknown regions of time. Thus he succeeded in entering the future and returned with the knowledge of events to come. He was what was generally described as a clairvoyant but in reality he was much more than that. He was, as Rhodan called him, a transchrontinental.

And one day disaster struck. During an experiment Ernst Ellert received a terrible electric shock and died instantly.

He died – and yet he was not dead!

His mind had left his body and wandered restlessly through the future and the past while his body showed no sign of decay. Although his heart had stopped beating his blood never got cold and his body thus remained warm.

Nobody – including Rhodan – knew what really had happened. Ellert's mind never returned to the present. He was unable to find his body again. They could only surmise that he was somewhere lost in eternity.

What if he returned someday and his body was no longer there waiting for him? Rhodan was aware of the problem and found a solution.

* * * *

Not far from Terrania – then still called Galacto City – the work-robots finished the job they had been given. The shaft extended 50 meters deep into the Gobi Desert. Heat-glazed surfaces, hard as steel, kept the walls at all times from deteriorating under the influence of meteorological forces and no underground water could seep into the shaft.

At the bottom of the shaft Rhodan had built a rectangular chamber with a

supply of oxygen, energy generators and instruction material. An automatic detection device – improved during the following years – was installed to register at once if Ernst Ellert should ever return to his waiting body.

In the middle of the vault, measuring four square meters, stood a bench to which the sophisticated instruments were attached. They would be activated immediately if as much as one breath was taken in the chamber, releasing an alarm.

The figure of a man rested on the bench. Ellert had been placed under the electronic instruments. Metal clamps were attached to his left wrist and to his ankles. His head was inside a hood. Some kind of a mirror almost touched his lips. It was wired so that the slightest exhalation would be sufficient to trigger the warning.

Perry Rhodan had erected a mausoleum for Ernst Ellert such as no other mortal possessed because he had felt that Ellert was no mortal in the strict sense of the word. Deep inside he had nurtured a conviction that some day in the near or far future he would meet the disembodied time traveler again.

The shaft had been filled with concrete which hardened quickly. There was no conceivable natural power that could disturb the peace of the ‘dead’. However there was an access to the tomb which was only known to Rhodan and if Ellert ever awakened he could free himself in less than half an hour.

But what would he find? An Earth which circled closely around a red Sun and threatened to crash into it? Or a planet which was bereft of life as the result of an invasion from outer space?

Rhodan had watched thoughtfully as the robots finished the pyramid-shaped rock on the spot where the tomb was located. Then he turned around and went back to the town which soon became the mightiest metropolis on Earth – Terrania.

* * * *

For 70 years nothing happened. Meanwhile Rhodan created the Solar Imperium and his power grew boundlessly. And during all that time there was a room under the energy dome of Terrania where all the lines of alarm converged. But a tiny lamp on a tall panel had always remained dark.

Under the lamp was a name: *Ernst Ellert*.

* * * *

On this particular day in September, Sgt. Stootz was on duty in the Alarm Chamber, as the Surveyance Centre was generally known.

Of course Stootz didn't know Ellert but he knew what his duties were. They were neither difficult nor very exciting. All he had to do was to watch whether one of the lamps in front of him lit up.

This didn't imply that Sgt. Stootz was an ignorant donk. On the contrary. It just so happened that he had pulled duty in the Alarm Chamber. Everybody had to take his turn.

He happened to be one of the most capable electronic experts among the radio technicians. Not only did he know that the alarm lamps could light up, he also knew why they lit up. The simple-looking panels concealed a complicated system of electronic and positronic installations. The connections led in all conceivable directions and mostly ended at the hyper-radio receivers so that a warning emanating from any Solar System XX, thousands of light-years away, would illuminate a lamp here before his eyes.

If they called him in the middle of the night something of utmost seriousness must have happened.

As he ran to his study, where the communication equipment was installed, several possibilities which could have caused the alarm ran through his mind. Some emergency could have occurred on Terra itself although this was extremely unlikely nowadays. Or somewhere in the cosmos an inferno had exploded in one of the stellar systems. Perhaps Rhodan had given an alarm. He was out there with half the battlefleet of the Solar Imperium and he wasn't gone on a picnic.

There were thousands of possibilities. But the one that had come to pass never entered his mind.

He rushed to the set next to his desk and pushed a button. The viewer lit up and showed the baffled face of Sgt. Stootz. "This is the Radio Centre Alarm Control, sir."

"What's the matter?" Mercant exclaimed, interrupting the dutiful report of the attendant technician. "Why do you wake me up?"

It was well known that Mercant never went to bed before 12 o'clock and Sgt. Stootz failed to take Mercant at his word. "Sir, I've received an alarm signal. A red lamp went on 10 seconds ago."

"Which lamp? For crying out loud!"

He could see how Sgt. Stootz leaned forward to take a closer look at the red

lamp. "The lamp is marked only by the name *Ernst Ellert*, sir."

It was as if an icy hand touched Mercant's shoulder. He knew Ellert and his background and was aware of the plight of the bodiless time traveller. He suspected what it meant that the alarm signal of the mausoleum was triggered.

His instructions came quickly and precisely in his usual manner. "Wake up Dr. Haggard and some of his assistants in the medical department. Tell Haggard to come to me at once. We'll have to drive out to the tomb. Get in touch with Rhodan by hyper-radio in the Myrtha or Siamed system. As soon as you make contact, switch it over to me. I must send him a report. Then . . ." He hesitated and finally added: "That'll be all!"

As the screen of the videophone went dark Mercant sat motionlessly as if transfixed in his room. The last movement of Tchaikovsky's 2nd symphony reverberated from the living room and then everything was quiet.

* * * *

When Perry Rhodan finished his story everybody in the Command Centre of the *DRUSUS* remained silent for awhile. Without uttering a word Sikerman peered at his dials and other instruments. The *DRUSUS* approached the point of transition with the velocity of light.

Atlan leaned against the wall and looked at Rhodan. A strange fire flickered in his eyes.

Pucky waited quietly. He sat with closed eyes on the couch and seemed to doze. But Rhodan knew that Pucky wasn't napping and that he had been listening with concentrated attention.

Harno floated near the ceiling in his usual unobtrusive manner.

Rhodan looked at each of his listeners. "Well, that's the story of Ernst Ellert. And now the red signal tells us that he finally woke up again. Mercant has called me immediately by hyper-radio. I don't know if we can make it back to Terra in time but we have to try. There can be no doubt that Ellert's mind has returned to his body after 70 years and I don't have to tell you what I believe."

Atlan looked up. "You believe that Ellert and Onot are identical," he said simply.

"There's little room for doubt," Rhodan agreed. "All indications point to our unknown supporter. He knew me although he couldn't remember from where. He mentioned that he was a wanderer through eternity and claimed

to have experienced the beginning and the end of the worlds or at least to have seen it. Ellert travelled through time – one more coincidence. No, I'm convinced that we've found Ellert at long last . . .”

“. . . or he has found us!” Pucky interjected. His high voice had a peculiar tone. “He must've been looking for us.”

“Quite possible,” Rhodan admitted and watched how Sikerman started the transition. The pain of the shockwaves ran through their bodies. They felt nothing else. When they looked at the observation screen they saw their own Solar system.

The landing was strictly routine. They hardly exchanged a word as Terra grew bigger and bigger till it filled the entire screen. The ship touched down with a gentle tap. They were home.

Rhodan left the *DRUSUS* together with Atlan and Pucky. Harno had retreated inconspicuously into Rhodan's pocket.

Mercant was already there to meet them. His face looked tired. The sun was rising in the east and he hadn't slept a wink all night. “Welcome to Earth,” he said, stretching out his hand to the men. Then he bent down to greet Pucky too. “You didn't come too late. Nothing more has happened so far.”

Rhodan was glad to hear it. He sighed with relief and climbed into the vehicle which was waiting to take them out of the city. The mausoleum had been erected with foresight so far out in the Gobi Desert that there was no likelihood of it ever being encroached on by the buildings of Terrania.

The houses retreated left and right and then downward as the wings folded out from the vehicle's body. They soared up into the air and Mercant briefed them tersely. “Haggard and his staff are keeping watch at the mausoleum but it's all still the same. The red light is on and nothing else has changed at the pyramid. The concrete is fully intact.”

Rhodan nodded. This really was what he had expected to find although he couldn't be sure. If his speculations were correct, it would be too early for Ellert to again take possession of his body.

The city fell back and the monotonous surface of the desert rolled backward below the glider until they recognized in the distance the needle which poked into the sky at dawn. The tomb!

They descended quickly and landed 20 meters away from the glistening pyramid. A group of men greeted them. They had been waiting in some station wagons which showed the sign of the Red Cross.

Dr. Haggard was one of those whom Rhodan had allowed to receive the cell-shower on the planet Wanderer. His lean figure was a little stooped although this was not due to his actual age. He came to shake Rhodan's hand and greeted Atlan and Pucky, who continued to waddle over to the pyramid, where he stopped.

"It's been a futile wait so far," Dr. Haggard said to Rhodan, who could detect a slight skepticism in his voice for which he could hardly blame Haggard. Every sensible man had to retain a modicum of doubt, hearing Ellert's story.

"I've anticipated as much," Rhodan replied, gazing thoughtfully at the pyramid the same way Atlan and Pucky did.

Haggard shrugged his shoulders. "You know I'm a scientist, Perry. I'm critical by nature. I find it difficult to assume that a human body that is buried for 70 years in the ground will become alive again."

"You know as well as I that Ellert never really died. You've examined him yourself with Manoli at the time. Did you find any explanation for the phenomenon?"

"No," the physician conceded hesitantly. "Of course not. But 70 years is too long a time . . ."

"Not for somebody who can roam through eternities," Rhodan ended the fruitless discussion. His eyes turned reflectively to the pyramid whose tip was gilded by the first rays of the sun.

He knew the secret of entering the burial vault without damaging the protective concrete shelter. He felt an unconscious resistance against penetrating the tomb but overcame it with logic. "Everybody wait here," he declared. "Only Atlan will accompany me."

He noticed Pucky's inquisitive face and shook his head slightly. His hand held Harno in his pocket. What about him? He decided to take the spherical being along.

Then he sought a spot on the smooth steeply soaring wall of the pyramid. He touched the surface with his hand and slid his fingers slowly across the wall. Once he stopped as if to think. Then he exerted some pressure and the ground of the desert began to move 5 meters from the base of the pyramid.

Mercant muttered audibly as he saw it. He had no inkling that such a secret entrance existed and the thought had never occurred to him.

Rhodan winked in his direction as if he had guessed Mercant's thoughts. Then he took Atlan by the arm and went with him to the place where the

rocky ground had opened up and laid bare steps leading down very steeply. The illumination flared up automatically.

Rhodan displayed no reluctance to reveal his secret. He realized that the pyramid had served its purpose.

He went in first and Atlan followed him. The two men who were destined to rule the Galaxy in the near future descended to a dead man who was no corpse, with the hope to be enlightened by him.

When Ernst Ellert touched the switch 70 years earlier and made several 1000 volts jump through his body he didn't lost consciousness for a moment. Although a terrific pain flashed through his body he felt it only for the fraction of a second. Then he left his body and was hurtled into the void of timelessness and infinite space. Everything around him sank into a bottomless vacuum which had neither beginning nor end.

Sometimes colorful swirls began to dance around him and vanished again. At other times he could hear weird electronic music although he had no ears. All these impressions came and went in rhythmic sequences as if he had been plunged inside a pulsating universe.

He drifted as if in nirvana. Once he thought he saw in the far distance a sun floating by which was surrounded by whirling planets. Galaxies slowly rotated around themselves and disappeared far back in space.

Eternity itself seemed to shrink.

And then he was engulfed in the stream of time which carried him away with swiftly growing speed. He lost all control over the medium which heretofore he believed he had mastered. He fell, tumbling aimlessly and without resistance into infinity which had nothing to do with matter, leaving the presence far behind.

Nothing could stop his plunge into the future.

Suddenly the first embodiment took place. It was performed so abruptly and unexpectedly that he was thrown to the ground when he felt his own weight – or rather the weight of the creature in whose body he was cast.

His mind after being hurled into the extreme future had found a new home but it was not the body of a human being that had admitted him. The creature had 4 legs and was endowed with very little intelligence, beside which Ellert's intellect easily found room.

Ellert was able to carry on a conversation with the creature. It was called Gorx and it told him that the planet's name was also Gorx just like the name of its sun and universe. Everything was called Gorx because only one

Gorx existed in its world.

Ellert made an all-out attempt to concentrate and accomplished the incredible feat of getting rid of Gorx's body again. Underneath he saw the awkward fur-clad body of the animal crawl toward some nearby rocky caves.

This was certainly not the place where he could find the answer to his questions.

He concentrated once more and raced out into space, which was time as well. Swirling in the stream of infinity, he was drawn back in the opposite direction as he could infer from the passing galaxies. When he stopped he was suspended in a void.

How was he to find his way? There was not a single reference point. He was a drop in the ocean of time. And at this moment Ellert began to realize that there was no return for him.

He had become a prisoner of eternity!

Not *where* he was constituted the decisive question but his ominous quandary was: *when*?

There was no answer to this question and thus Ernst Ellert, the prisoner of eternity, commenced his search for the present time, which – for him – lasted millions of years . . .

* * * *

The cover was closed behind them with a faint thud, giving Atlan an eerie sensation which he didn't want to betray to Rhodan since he was already prepared for what awaited them.

The steps were small and narrow, appearing to continue endlessly. Rhodan led and seemed to know exactly where his goal was.

He came to a seamless wall and waited until Atlan caught up with him. "The vault is just behind this wall, Admiral."

"It's better secured than the richest treasure trove," Atlan said.

"Ellert's body is a treasure even without his mind," Rhodan replied. "But if his mind has come back . . ."

He didn't finish the sentence. Silently he put his hand against the lock concealed behind the metal. The warmth of his body and the inherent frequency of his brain activated the contact and the door swung open.

There was a narrow corridor behind it which led to another door. He simply

opened the door. Anybody who had succeeded in coming this far could not be stopped from going on.

Rhodan entered the vault with Atlan close behind him. Ernst Ellert still reposed on his bench without any noticeable change. He looked as if he had just gone to sleep. His face seemed to be alive. It was a little pale but not drained of blood. His dark hair was as smooth as if it had just been combed. The eyes were closed and the lips pressed together.

Ernst Ellert didn't breathe. The mirror in front of his mouth was clear and showed no trace of exhalation.

Rhodan stood awhile before the mutant without moving. Atlan stood at his side and hardly dared to breathe. He was overwhelmed by the extraordinary experience. A dead man had called them and they had followed his request across 6,000 light-years.

It wasn't long before the first probing thought-impulses stirred the mind of the two men. First they were weak and vacillating but soon they became stronger and clearer.

Perry Rhodan! Did you come? I've waited a long time for you.

Rhodan stood in awe as he recognized who spoke to him soundlessly via telepathy. His voice was hoarse and rough as he answered: "It's you, Ernst Ellert! I always knew that you'd return someday although I didn't think it would take so long. Were you in the body of Onot, the chief physicist of the Druufs?"

I'm still there, Rhodan! I've only freed half of myself but soon I'll be completely free. Until then . . .

"Yes?" Rhodan asked tensely as the impulses faltered.

"I can't leave the Druufs alone, at least not as long as a passage to our time-plane exists. When the two systems have passed each other, my task will be fulfilled."

Rhodan was stunned. The words had been spoken loudly behind him. He spun around and saw Atlan standing pale and shaken at the wall while he mouthed words.

"Yes, Rhodan, I'm speaking through your friend Atlan. I want to emphasize that I'm free, if not completely so. Anyway I was able to take over Atlan's body, yet he can hear me too."

Rhodan realized vaguely what had occurred. "Please tell us what has happened to you," he urged.

And Ellert recounted the events, using Atlan's voice. "When I was caught

in the stream of time and had lost my bearings, I wandered restlessly from universe to universe and from eons to eons. I was able to move freely but it was impossible for me to find what we call the present time. I had lost my way – so I believed – until I found the Druufs all of a sudden. They were the only people in the whole universe to my mind.”

He paused briefly and then continued. “I was wrong. There is not *one* but several time-planes which exist side by side in separate spheres. In our own time-plane I could have oriented myself and found my way back to our present time. But the electric shock catapulted me out of our time-sphere and across the void into the realm of the Druufs. There was no way of undoing what had happened to me and I felt cast out forever.”

Rhodan followed Ellert’s vivid description with growing understanding. Nobody could have explained it better than the person who had experienced it in his own mind.

“And when will you be able to take full possession of your own body again?” Rhodan inquired.

“Very soon, you may be sure, Perry! Even if I could I wouldn’t do it today. The Druufs are a much greater menace than you can imagine. I can exercise some influence on them because as Onot I belong to their ruling elite. If it hadn’t been for me they would’ve conquered Terra and our Galaxy three months ago.”

“Three months ago?” Rhodan tried to remember.

“Yes. They broke through a suddenly opened gap between the two worlds and attacked the nation of Arkon. Many planets were consumed in a holocaust and others lost many continents . . .”

Atlan’s voice suddenly broke down. He looked at Rhodan in amazement. Then Ellert continued but now by telepathy, again directly speaking to the brains of the two men. *Now I remember that I already know Atlan through whose mouth I spoke. Three months ago he was the Commander of an Arkonide battlefleet that colonized a solar system.*

Rhodan quickly glanced at Atlan before he answered. “That solar system was our own, Ellert. And you didn’t meet him three months but 10,000 years ago. That’s how far you went back into the past to find the present.”

There was a long pause. *My memory is still very sketchy and my sense of time has severely suffered. I don’t believe I can still travel through the past and the future and if I don’t want to lose Terra again I must return to you as soon as possible. However it would be much too dangerous to leave everything in the hands of the Druufs alone. The danger will pass only*

when the time-shrinking funnel has closed up again.

Rhodan remembered an important matter which he had nearly forgotten. "You're working as Onot on a very interesting project. I believe it's called a time-freezer. What is it?"

As Onot I could tell you all about it but as Ellert I need records. If I can obtain them I'll probably be able to construct the identical device on Earth.

"One more question," Rhodan said. "The Druufs use a method of transition which avoids the shock effect we must go through. What do you know about it?"

Ellert answered again through Atlan. "I'll be in a position to give you this information when I'm completely free again. As for now, I can tell you only that the ships of the Druufs indeed cross the border to hyperspace – which also exists in the other time-plane – without any shock whatsoever. As soon as the light velocity is surpassed, an automatic compensator is activated which neutralizes time and prevents a change of mass. The ship accelerates within in a minimal span to about a million times the velocity of light. Although it flies through hyperspace the normal universe remains visible. This is an enormous advantage for orientation. The complicated computations which have to be prepared for each hyper-flight become superfluous. Furthermore, the pain caused by the rematerialization is eliminated. You can fly by sight and it's a unique experience."

Rhodan was greatly excited by the idea but he remained cool and answered to the point. "What are your chances for securing the plans of this propulsion system?"

"I'll certainly try to get them, Perry. I won't return to my body without those plans. By the way, I want to thank you for preserving it so well. I've had no trouble finding it."

"What enabled you to overcome your restraint at least partially?"

"Can't you guess? It was the field of the time-freezer which I was able to enter thanks to Pucky's curiosity."

He paused for a second and then mused: "It's odd but I can remember things and names that I've never known before because they didn't exist at the time."

Rhodan looked down at the motionless face of Ellert. It was as dead and rigid as before. But someday it would be alive again.

"What advice can you give me?" Rhodan asked.

Now Ellert resorted again to telepathy, possibly because he didn't want to

burden Atlan too much. *Keep fighting against the Druufs. Be sure to destroy the main computer center underneath the capital of Druufon without attracting suspicion yourself. Form an alliance with Arkon and let robots perform the destruction. You must take the risk that Onot might lose his life in the effort. He may die in any case when I leave him.*

“What shall I do if the Regent can’t be persuaded?”

Rhodan felt that Ellert’s impulses became already weaker as he answered:

Do as I tell you! There isn’t much time . . . so long, Perry, Atlan. I must return to Druufon. Onot has fainted. I must . . .

The impulses ceased abruptly. Ellert had withdrawn without being forced to. However some day soon . . .

Rhodan took one last look at the lifeless face under the electronic surveillance instruments and turned around to Atlan. “Let’s go. We know what we came to find out.”

Atlan followed him silently as they passed through the two doors and ascended the narrow steps of the shaft. They breathed easier again as soon as they reached the surface and saw the sun which had meanwhile risen high into the sky. Its warming rays were a symbol of life and assurance.

The cover-plate which concealed the access snapped shut again.

Pucky waited for them near the pyramid and advised Rhodan: “I’ve followed your conversation by telepathy, Perry.”

Rhodan nodded and looked at Mercant who walked toward him.

“Well?” Mercant inquired tensely. He was much too weak a telepath to be able to listen in on the conversation that had taken place in the tomb. “What happened? Where’s Ellert?”

Rhodan looked up to the tip of the pyramid as he answered: “Ellert will return again when the time has come. He still has to complete a task – together with us. He spoke to us but his body has to rest awhile longer, Mercant. Order a continuous watch at the mausoleum. He’ll be ready the next time the alarm signal lights up.”

Rhodan looked around and noticed Dr. Haggard. “It won’t be long until you can examine Ellert’s state of health. His physical state, I mean. As far as his mental health is concerned . . .”

Rhodan suddenly became silent. He turned around and walked without saying another word to the glider where Pucky was already waiting for him.

3.

THE COSMIC INTELLIGENCE

The flight back to Myrtha 7 took place the same day since Rhodan was driven by an inner restlessness which he couldn't explain. Perhaps it was brought on by Ellert's words, which made it really clear to him what horrendous menace the Druufs presented. It was high time to deal a crushing blow to these monsters.

Even before they reached the necessary velocity for the transition Harno showed them a picture of the Siamed system. The sphere had increased its size to twice that of a bowling ball. First the Regent's ships blockading the transference funnel became visible on the curved surface, as they lay in wait to intercept the units sallying forth from the exit.

Rhodan took a deep breath when he saw the gleaming cloud of vessels. He glanced at Atlan. "What's your estimate of the number of warships?"

The immortal Arkonide shrugged his shoulders. "At least 30,000 big and small units. There are also Springer ships among them. It's a tremendous armada."

"But the Druufs will be able to handle it unless we do something else to stop them," Rhodan replied. "I think I'll now respond to the Regent's call for help." He shook his head in astonishment. "30,000 warships! It's enough to conquer a universe. I wouldn't have believed Arkon could muster such reserves."

There was pride in Atlan's voice as he replied. "Think what a formidable partner Arkon can be when it'll be ruled again by an Emperor instead of a machine!"

Harno changed the picture. Druufon came into view, surrounded by long circling cruisers which were ready to defend their harassed planet against further attacks. It would be extremely difficult – if not impossible – to break that ring of defense.

Rhodan warily observed the superior might of the enemy and contemplated with concern the sacrifices an attack would cost him.

Harno switched the picture again and showed a view of the subterranean base on Hades where already 12 transmitter stations had been set up with a range up to 2 light-years. This meant that men and materiel could be transferred to the universe of the Druufs from the outside without running

the perilous gauntlet of the funnel.

Matter-transmitter . . .? A plan began to form in Rhodan's brain which was so bold and fantastic that he didn't think it through. Yet . . .

It might have seemed strange that Atlan conceived the same idea at the same time. However considering the similarity of both men's character it could hardly be regarded as a mere coincidence.

"Aren't the Druufs also familiar with the matter-transmitter?" Atlan asked Rhodan during the lull in the conversation.

Rhodan looked up and into Atlan's questioning eyes. "They've got at least one of them," he confirmed. "Why?"

The mousebeaver on his couch became curious. Harno floated up to the ceiling, assuming that he had done his part.

Atlan countered with a grin. "I bet you barbarian know why I ask. You've seen the cordon they've thrown up around Druufon as well as I did and you also have wondered how we can get to the computer center without losing half our fleet in the attempt. There are a number of ways to try it. We can seek a new agreement with the Druufs, giving us permission to land, or we can attack openly. And then there's a third possibility!"

"Of which I've thought too," Rhodan admitted with a smile. "Any agreement of the previous type must be ruled out since we want to come to an understanding with the Regent of Arkon. This leaves the possibility of an open attack which I wouldn't recommend for obvious reasons. Then we come to the third alternative – the transmitter. Isn't that what you've in mind?"

"Exactly, Perry! But how?"

Rhodan only said: "Ellert – Onot!"

Both men fell silent again as they watched Lt.-Col. Baldur Sikerman going into the transition which would take them to Myrtha 7, also called Grautier.

* * * *

On the evening of the same day – Terranian time – the *DRUSUS* lifted off again and performed a short transition across 22 light-years, which was the distance between Grautier and the access funnel. It was purely by accident that the distance varied only slightly although the field of the time-overlap moved along the edge of the Galaxy nearly at half the velocity of light. However the Myrtha system also moved with almost the same speed in the same direction.

When the *DRUSUS* materialized again it was thrust in the middle of a light cruiser formation of the Arkonide Imperium. By the comparatively hesitant reaction Rhodan recognized that the Arkonide units were manned by crews and not by robots. Undoubtedly the vessels belonged to the fleet of the Springers – allies of the Regent – and before they could make a decision on measures they had to take against the *DRUSUS*, Rhodan called them by radio.

The Springers were quite surprised to meet the daredevil from Terra again and they were flabbergasted when Rhodan expressed the wish to talk to the Regent. They gave him the assurance that he could get in touch with Arkon without being molested by their powerful war fleet.

Moreover Rhodan knew that the Springers could tune in on his negotiations with the Regent and this was one of the major reasons he chose this approach.

Rhodan, Atlan, Reginald Bell and Pucky went to the radio room of the *DRUSUS* where the hyper-radio transmitter was located. The transceiver was ready. The oval picture screen showed the familiar symbol of the Robot Brain on Arkon, a huge metallic hemisphere resting on a pedestal, while repeating the call they had been receiving for several weeks:

THE REGENT OF ARKON CALLING PERRY RHODAN OF
TERRA! OUR MUTUAL ENEMY HAS LAUNCHED A FEROCIOUS
ATTACK. WE MUST COMBINE OUR FORCES OR PERISH IN THE
ONSLAUGHT. I REQUEST YOUR SUPPORT, PERRY RHODAN!
PLEASE CONTACT ME.

The impersonal metallic voice kept repeating the same message endlessly but so far Rhodan had not responded to the call for help.

“I would’ve given up long ago,” Bell muttered, studying the hemisphere with the eyes of an expert.

“That’s because you don’t have the brains of a robot, thank goodness!” Pucky expostulated, slouching comfortably in a corner to observe the dealings closely.

Rhodan paid no attention to them as he flipped the switch of the transmitter and spoke into the mike. “This is Rhodan calling the Regent of Arkon! I wish to hear your proposition.”

Then they waited. Not because the radio waves required much time to span the enormous distance; they were transmitted through hyperspace and reached Arkon in the very same second. The message was picked up immediately and referred to the Regent without delay. The robot brain was

versatile enough to conduct hundreds of conversations simultaneously. It had kept a channel open for communications from Rhodan at all times. However the Regent needed some time to study the matter and to explore all possible combinations and eventualities before giving his answer to Rhodan, who must have caught him by surprise.

Nevertheless the mechanical voice resonated in the radio room of the *DRUSUS* after a pause of only two seconds. "It's you Rhodan! I was right to assume that you're still alive. Do you know the Druufs?"

"Yes, I do. What do you suggest?"

"I've got an armada ready to throw into the battle. Join forces with us and we can launch an assault that will annihilate the Druufs."

"I'm not so sure of it." Rhodan rejected the proposal outright because he suspected that the Regent once again tried to kill two birds with one stone. Once the Druufs were eliminated it would be Terra's turn to be conquered. "I've got a better plan."

"If it's better than mine I'll accept it."

This was a logical answer that satisfied Rhodan. "I want you to send a battleship of the *TITAN* type through the expansion funnel into the universe of the Druufs. Put a crew of fighter robots on board with orders to land a contingent of one or two dozen robots on Druufon and to raise havoc on the planet."

There was a moment's silence before the Regent objected. "Such an action doesn't make much sense to me, Rhodan . . ."

"It will if you keep listening."

"Very well, go ahead!"

And Rhodan continued to submit his plan which he had developed in all details with Atlan. He explained it all in concise language. The idea was so logical and self-explanatory that the Regent didn't hesitate a moment with his answer. "I agree with you. It's an excellent plan and I'll put at your disposal whatever you demand."

"I'll be ready! Issue your orders!" Rhodan responded.

They were surrounded by the ships of the Springers which were so numerous that they darkened the sight of the stars.

Rhodan, Atlan and Bell returned to the Command Centre while Pucky remained in the radio room.

"I'm curious to see what'll happen," Atlan said with a sigh, dropping into the nearest chair. "But what could go wrong?"

Rhodan gave no answer. He carefully watched the observation screen which depicted the warships of the Springers. There were several robot cruisers among them. They were particularly dangerous because they obeyed their commands without regard to any losses they had to suffer. They knew neither fear nor pain nor scruples.

In the meantime the *DRUSUS* was busy making a few changes. One of the huge storage compartments was emptied. It was large enough to hold several cruisers or other equipment.

Half an hour went by and then a freighter materialized a light-second away from the *DRUSUS*. It came out of hyperspace and braked its speed sharply, barely avoiding a catastrophe when it stopped within a hair's breath of the *DRUSUS*.

Rhodan made radio contact with the Commander who reported: "I'm bringing the fighter-robots you've requested."

"Thank you. Did you come straight from Arkon?"

"Yes. On the Regent's orders."

"Very good. We'll open a loading hatch and you can have the robots transfer to our vessel. How about my other conditions?"

"An Arkonide battleship is at your service."

Rhodan was gratified and ended the conversation. Everything else was strictly routine. The two ships were anchored and locked together magnetically. 500 heavy fighter-robots marched out of the freighter's hatch and across a gravitational gangplank into the storage compartment of the *DRUSUS*.

Each was a 3-meter-high colossus of the latest model with a rotating ring of weapons at chest level which enabled the robot to shoot simultaneously in all directions. Energy-beamers were attached to the end of their four arms. Once they were committed to action, each of these metallic monsters could create a pandemonium around it. It only depended on the kind of program which was fed to their positronic brains.

Once again Rhodan got in touch with Arkon. "Everything is set, Regent! Start the attack tomorrow. Time 12 o'clock Terra time. Do you know when noon is on Earth?"

"Yes. It's already figured out. All clear!" There was a tiny pause and then the Regent added: "Good luck, Rhodan of Terra!"

"Thank you!" Rhodan smiled coldly. There was no reason to assume that the Regent had expressed his good wishes because of any feelings for

Rhodan. He had done it merely because he considered it to be to his own advantage.

The *DRUSUS* resumed speed and put a distance of several light-hours between itself and the waiting formations of the Springers and robots. Then Rhodan made contact with Hades.

Lt. Stepan Potkin, Deputy Commander of the secret base in the heart of the Druufs' domain, was already informed. He reported that receiver #3 of the transmitter station was ready.

Rhodan and Atlan went to the storage hangar of the *DRUSUS*. It was of course no accident that the matter transmitter had been installed in an adjacent room.

"Let's take a trip," Atlan said, opening the door to the transmitter room and addressing the robots: "The first 20 robots will follow me in the transmitter. The next group will leave in exactly 10 seconds and the transfer will be finished in 250 seconds. Then you'll receive further programming."

Rhodan stood at the door as Atlan went into the energy cage of the transmitter with the first 20 robots. Two seconds later Atlan and the war-machines had disappeared to materialize again at the same moment two light-years away on Hades.

Then the next 20 and the next . . .

Rhodan left the *DRUSUS* with the last batch, leaving Sikerman behind to stand by together with Bell and Pucky. To do nothing severely strained Pucky's patience most of all.

* * * *

Everything went according to plan on Hades. While the technicians were busy preparing the fighter-robots for their imminent task, Rhodan and Atlan went to Capt. Rous, who was in charge of the base together with Potkin. The light cruiser *CALIFORNIA* was berthed in the hangar of Hades.

Marcel Rous was one of the men who first succeeded in penetrating to the time-plane of the Druufs before the time-modifying funnel connection existed. With the help of a lens-field generator he managed to surmount the barrier of time and almost was dumped into a time-prison from which there would have been no escape.

He felt relieved when he saw Rhodan and Atlan enter and walked to them smilingly with outstretched arms. "I'm happy, sir . . ."

"Everything is fine," Rhodan reassured him and shook his hand. After Rous

and Atlan had greeted each other, Rhodan reported what had happened on Earth and concluded: "What we need now is telepathic contact with Ellert. I don't know how we would do it without Harno's help."

He reached in his pocket, took out the small sphere and asked: "Can you find Onot?"

Atlan had not even noticed that Rhodan had taken Harno along.

The sphere became bigger and turned into a picture screen.

I'm going to try, was the answer in the brains of the three men.

Multicolored configurations spread out over the milky surface of the ball and formed the image of a planet which quickly increased in size. Druufon!

But Harno kept searching and pried under the surface of the planet. All important installations of the Druufs were located deep in the protective ground of stone inside Druufon. Down here ticked the heart of a superb technology with the goal of victory over time itself.

Onot was clearly visible. The chief physicist of the Druufs rested on a large bed with his eyes closed. It should be easier now, Rhodan thought, to get in touch with Ellert, provided Ellert's mind didn't sleep too, if he could do so at all.

Rhodan didn't have time to ponder the question further since he began to feel the cautious probing by which Ellert made his presence felt.

Atlan and Capt. Rous also understood what Ellert 'said'. *I like your plan, Rhodan. It's very ingenious. Can you see me?*

"We can see the scientist Onot. Harno has found him."

Your thoughts are coming through only in fragments. Please describe your plan in a concise and orderly manner so that it'll not be ruined by a misunderstanding. I'm listening.

And so Rhodan explained: "The fleet of the Arkonide Regent will make another raid on Druufon and try to land a battleship with fighter-robots. The action is conducted as a diversionary maneuver because we don't expect that the robot warriors will be able to occupy the computer center. This will be done instead by our robots who will be piped in by our transmitters. It will be your job to correlate the receiver of the transmitter station in the computer center so that it will 'happen' to coincide with ours. Can you do that?"

It will be done because I am Onot too. The answer was clear and confident. *I will contact you beforehand, Rhodan. We're bound to succeed. Anything else?*

Rhodan was pleased. "We're all set, Ellert. Until tomorrow . . ."

There was no further answer. Perhaps it was too much of a strain for Ellert to maintain contact with them and he wanted to avoid wasting his energy.

Atlan cleared his throat. "And what part are we going to play in the proposed action? I haven't been able to see it as yet."

"At the proper time we and Capt. Rous will pay a polite visit to the Druufs. I want them to think that we're still their friends – at least until we learn the secret of the ultralightspeed propulsion system." Rhodan suddenly smiled. "We're going to call it star-drive."

"And how about the time-freezer?"

"This would be a gift that would be hard to reject – if we can get it," Rhodan replied, expressing some reservations. "It's not as important as the star-drive with which I'd like to equip our spaceships. It has a lot of advantages over a hypertransition."

"When do we start?" Rous inquired anxiously.

"Tomorrow," Rhodan put him off. Then he suddenly shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you, Rous. It'll be better if I fly to Druufon with the *DRUSUS*. The Druufs know that dreadnought and have a healthier respect for it than for the little *CALIFORNIA*. Don't be angry with me . . ."

"Tactical considerations are more important," Rous gamely smiled, hiding his frustration. But perhaps he didn't really feel all that disappointed. It would certainly be no joyride to fly into this cauldron of hell.

Rhodan gave him some final instructions about timing to avoid any possible interference and went back with Atlan and Harno to Lt. Potkin who supervised the programming of the robots.

"They'll start their work of destruction as soon as they arrive in the subterranean computer center," Lt. Potkin advised Rhodan. "Each of these fighter-robots possesses the nuclear firepower of a light cruiser. If I imagine that all these 500 machines will be let loose at the same moment . . ."

"Don't do that," Rhodan said amiably, glancing at the machines lined up in straight rows. They looked like armored knights out of the past although they belonged to the future which had just begun for Terra.

Harno came down and let Rhodan put him in his pocket, where he seemed to feel cozy and which could very well have been the case. Rhodan didn't notice any weight.

"We're going to return to the *DRUSUS* today but we'll be in touch with

you via hyper-radio, Lt. Potkin. As soon as Arkon's fleet launches the attack tomorrow, our big gamble with the Druufs will begin. I hope they'll play their part."

"We really depend on them," Atlan remarked.

But Rhodan shook his head. "It won't make a great difference. We'll get into the computer center with our 500 warriors in any case and they'll smash everything that gets in their way. We can't help that but the Druufs will no longer consider me their friend, which I would regret very much."

Atlan gave no answer. He silently walked with Rhodan to the transmitter which would take them back to the *DRUSUS*. He remained skeptical, true to his nature.

* * * *

It was 4 hours till the start of the attack.

After a refreshing sleep Atlan and Pucky entered Rhodan's cabin almost at the same time. Bell was already there and sat on the couch with a dreamy look on his face. Pucky waddled to the couch, jumped up and made himself comfortable, leaning against his friend. It didn't bother him that Bell looked suspiciously at him out of the corners of his eyes.

Rhodan had had his breakfast and was in a confident mood. They had laid their plans and nothing would change them – and they had 4 whole hours with nothing to do.

Harno the mysterious creature of time and energy, floated beneath the ceiling, shrunk into a harmless ball.

Atlan sat down across from Rhodan. "Now it won't take much longer, barbarian."

"There could be circumstances when 4 hours would be a long time . . ."

The *DRUSUS* was positioned a small distance away from Arkon's spacefleet, about one light-year distant from the scintillating alignment funnel which stood still in relation to the *DRUSUS*, the fleet and the solar system of the Einstein Universe, although it actually wandered around the universe at half the velocity of light. It was due to this coincidence that it remained stable for such a long time. At shorter encounters these time-overlap zones of the two worlds existed only for days or hours and sometimes only for a few seconds.

"I'm glad to get a little respite," Rhodan admitted. "The past hours and days were extremely strenuous and I doubt that the future will be less

demanding.”

“Hardly,” Atlan agreed. He looked at Bell, who was busy stroking Pucky’s fur. “Even our corpulent friend will have to be very nimble.”

Bell barely looked up. “Nimble? How well you put it, Admiral! But you’re quite mistaken. What’s there for me to do? The robots and Ellert will take care of this job.” He hesitated as if mentioning the name had reminded him of something. “By the way, is Ellert going to report again?”

“I’m sure he will. But only a few minutes before the attack or during the action. That’ll depend on the opportunity he gets.” Rhodan paused and glanced up to the ceiling as though he wanted to ask Harno something. But then he refrained.

He had underestimated Harno. *Why don’t you ask me, Rhodan?*

The thought-impulse was received by all brains and was understood by everybody in the room. Rhodan was embarrassed for a moment when he was caught by surprise but then he smiled cheerfully, shaking his head. “Don’t pry so much, Harno Anyway, you know what I wanted to ask you – and not only today. Answer me if you please.”

You would like to know whether I can do more than show pictures. Of course I can, Rhodan, but sometimes I’m not permitted to go further. There are things which are forbidden also to me.

“Forbidden – by whom?”

It was the same question which Harno had refused to answer before. Could he ever answer this question or was he even willing to do so?

By him whom you’ve met before.

Rhodan stared at the ceiling and gave up asking further questions since he realized that Harno was reluctant to say more.

Not Bell though – he was not one to pussyfoot around. “Whom do you mean? We’ve met many people in our time . . .

You can’t classify him as one of the ‘people’, Harno lectured him silently but authoritatively. It’s a being with sublime intelligence, immortal like me but much wiser and mightier. His home is the whole cosmos and the light of the stars is his food.

“It seems to me that you’ve got many things in common,” Bell said pensively. “You also live by the light of the stars. They give you energy and the ability to be what you are. But what are you really?”

“I’ve got a feeling that you’re a little bit too nosy, fatso!” Pucky growled, growing uneasy.

Before Bell could reply, Harno continued to explain: *As I said before, curiosity is the source of all knowledge. So don't hold it against him. Whether I can give you answers or not, doesn't depend on him but solely on what I'm allowed to tell you and what not. Yes, I am related to him, the powerful being that has limits too. I've never met one that is omnipotent and nobody else will.*

Rhodan was afraid that the conversation was treading intangible ground. "Let's not press him any further," he said sternly. Harno will reveal it whenever he thinks that it will be proper. However this'll not keep me from asking you about the other things you can do, Harno. What else can you do besides showing us any spot in the universe?"

As if this weren't enough, the reply came back a little tauntingly. *What do you expect me to do?*

Rhodan was startled by the response but he quickly formulated a general question, desiring Harno's answer. "Can you change the spherical shape of your body and put it to some other use? For instance, can you change it into a cube?"

They all could sense laughter. Harno was indeed laughing although there was nothing to be seen of it on the little black ball. However there could be no doubt that Harno was amused by Rhodan's question.

Harnahan also wanted to know why I'm a sphere and I told him that a sphere is the most ideal of all forms. Naturally I can take on the shape of a cube if it's necessary.

"Thank you, Harno I'll remember that if it becomes necessary. This could happen to be very soon. There's one more thing I'd like to know: Can you fly at ultralightspeed in any form?"

Yes.

"This is all I wish to know for now, Harno," Rhodan replied, greatly pleased.

The significance of what they had just learned slowly began to dawn on the listeners. They kept staring at the ceiling where the little black ball hovered inconspicuously.

Only Pucky piped up with a roguish grin. "You see the size of your body doesn't matter very much. It all depends on whether you've got it in you or not. Bell is physically so much bigger than I. The logical conclusion would be . . ."

Harno chuckled with amusement in their brains.

Chief physicist Onot hadn't felt well at all for some time. It had begun 3 or 4 months ago. At first he had suffered some headaches to which he had paid scant attention. But then he lost his consciousness for seconds, or so it seemed, but when he looked at his watch he found that a few hours had lapsed.

Was it a sickness? The symptoms worried Onot more and more.

Often when he was alone in his laboratory, working on his mysterious time experiments, he couldn't suppress a feeling that he was no longer by himself. He had a sensation that somebody was listening in, somebody whose presence was invisible and yet exercised an uncanny influence on his thoughts.

He assumed that it had something to do with his experiments. After all he was experimenting with problems of time and he would not have been surprised if someday he were to encounter beings and objects from the past or the future. Nevertheless . . .

Onot was a sober scientist and the most eminent of his race. He couldn't afford to lend credence to hallucinations of his brain. He wasn't ill! He couldn't allow himself to be sick.

As he sat in his laboratory he was aware that the situation outside had reached a critical stage. The cleft in the universe which he had predicted some time ago had indeed occurred and thus access to another time-plane had been assured for some time. The alignment had persisted up to now and nobody, not even he, could foresee how much longer the present state would last.

However this had presented a danger! Just as easily as the Druufs were able to transgress their boundaries, the inhabitants of the alien universe could invade the realm of the Druufs. And this was precisely what had happened.

Onot smiled, derisively. There couldn't have been a more opportune time for him. His discovery was finished and tested. If necessary it could be converted into a weapon with the power to subdue whole galaxies. Besides the conventional fleet of the Druufs was strong enough to repulse all adversaries.

He knew that at this very moment the heavy battleships of their fleet were assembled to ward off the blockading armada of robots at the cleft. Everything stood ready on Druufon to give any hostile enemies breaking through the barrier a warm reception.

Onot was all smiles when he turned on the generator for the last time to activate the time-freezing field. Outwardly there was no sign of the energy flowing through the complicated apparatus and radiating from the dish at the ceiling. Only a portion of the laboratory was under the influence of the time-field, which was circular and had a diameter of nearly 10 meters.

Onot reached into the pocket of his loose robe and pulled out his closed fist. He stepped forward and cautiously opened his hand to make sure that the little mikar, a harmless mouse-like animal, was still alive. The mikars were generally used for experimental purposes.

“You won’t get hurt,” he tried to calm the trembling creature. “In a way you’ll live almost forever because time will be a million-fold slower for you. You’d be immortal if I wouldn’t switch off the time-field.”

He laughed thunderously but a human ear could neither have heard his roar or his words. “And now – have fun . . .”

He raised his arm and threw the wriggling animal into the middle of the room, right into the invisible time-field. The mikar flew a distance – and then stopped in midair as though its movement were abruptly blocked by a magic word. It appeared to be dead because its limbs were instantly paralyzed. Without the slightest motion it was suspended in space as though frozen in a block of ice less than 5 meters from Onot.

The chief physicist watched the animal with satisfaction but without astonishment. This was exactly what he had expected. The mikar now lived in another, artificially created time-plane. Before it would take another breath or sink to the floor, years would go by. It was completely helpless and thus at the mercy of the invisible Druuf. And every living being would suffer the same fate if it were caught in Onot’s time-field. An entire world would come under his thrall as soon as he would build a generator adequate for this task.

There was only one problem which Onot had not yet solved. How could he reach the defenseless foe without being trapped in the time-field himself? This was a dilemma that had to be tackled next.

He walked over to a switch panel at the wall. Touching a few instrument controls he energized the shock conductor he had newly devised. Of course it would be useless to enter the time-field himself because he would be subjected to the same physical laws prevailing in that field and thereby face again a normal opponent. He had to try to kill the immobilized foe or at least put him out of action. Then the time-field could be deactivated again and the defeated world could be taken over after all resistance was

eliminated.

The mikar still hovered at the same spot when the observation screen registered the contact of the shock-rays. Onot kept the energy flowing for a period of almost 10 seconds before he shut it off again. With virtually uncontrollable excitement he returned to his former place and put his hand on the lever which turned off the time-freezer.

The mikar dropped two meters to the floor as though it were suddenly released by an unseen hand. Onot darted forward, picked up the little creature and held it before his eyes. He could see that the pulsating little heart moved its skin. The animal was alive but unconscious.

Onot happily sighed in relief. His experiment was a success.

The shock-rays had been effectively neutralized so that they pierced the time-field with unchanged velocity. The result was that any object within the artificial field could be reached and dealt with without the necessity of entering the danger zone himself.

The technical problem had been solved brilliantly and Onot felt triumphant. Now the next step was to persuade the Council to put the necessary means at his disposal for perfecting a field-generator and increasing its magnitude to deliver practical results. However he didn't consider this to be a very difficult task.

When he had come to this point in his train of thoughts, he felt the boring pressure in his brain again. Maybe he was overly tired. He didn't want to worry about it and went to his private apartment, which adjoined the laboratory. Suddenly he felt very weak and exhausted.

He probably had worked too hard. He was glad to reach his large bed. Without closing the door he stretched out on his bed and closed his 4 eyes, falling immediately asleep.

* * * *

Other events took place at the same time.

The Council of 66 assembled in the forum. This time the representatives of the people were admitted because the necessity of an immediate attack had to be debated. The foe from the other universe was to be not merely driven away but annihilated. A blockade of the aliens' time-plane would no longer be tolerated.

All these steps were taken quickly and without opposition. The proposals of the wise men were unanimously adopted by the assembly. The attending

fleet commanders were given instructions to mobilize their warships and to leave their subterranean hangars as soon as the orders were given.

Druufon became a fortress bristling with weapons before half an hour was out. All over the planet the widely dispersed heavy guns emerged from their concealed underground positions and pointed toward the shining sky where the red and green twin suns created magic reflexes. The guns were loaded by gigantic energy sources and stood ready to unleash their incredible firepower at the push of a button.

Druufon was prepared to strike against Arkon. It was purely a coincidence that the robot-fleet of the Regent received the order to attack the same minute.

This could have brought total failure to Rhodan or certain victory. Nobody knew. Not even Ellert.

4.

WEAPON HORRENDOUS

At precisely 12 o'clock Terranian time, the tremendous spherical ship began to move and rapidly accelerated to the speed of light. There were no humans aboard the gigantic vessel, only fighter robots of the latest design. They were of the same type as those waiting in the transmitters of Hades for their deployment. The ship was steered by remote control and was considered expendable from the moment it started.

Simultaneously the entire fleet of the Regent started a push against the rent in the universe to launch its diversionary attack. In the confusion of the thrust it was hoped that the robot transport could reach the home planet of the Druufs and discharge its cargo of death.

Rhodan held the *DRUSUS* back of the frontline in order to intervene at the right moment. The radio transceiver was tuned in on the frequency of the Druufs so that the connection could be established when the time came.

However there was another contact to be made first. Rhodan had tried in vain to get in touch with Ellert by telepathy. Pucky's attempts were fruitless while Harno merely succeeded in catching a picture of Onot. However the Druuf physicist was occupied with an experiment and concentrated his mind so intensively that Ellert apparently had no opportunity to free himself.

This could prove to be fatal as Ellert was supposed to turn on the transmitter receiving station in the computer center in one hour – or sooner – and to escape to safety in good time.

Rhodan anxiously watched Harno. He could clearly observe how Onot threw a tiny animal into the time-field, killed or stunned it with the help of another instrument and then deactivated the field and retrieved the animal.

Meanwhile Arkon's armada raced through the split into the universe of the Druufs where it clashed with the armed might of the alien adversaries in a tremendous space battle whose severity was unequalled in the annals of civilized races.

Thousands of ships were thrown into the fight and thousands of energy-cannons spit fire and destruction, piercing defense shields and ripping to shreds the heaviest metallic armorplates. Large and small ships alike burst open, oozing away in space or melting into radioactive clouds.

Rhodan paid little attention to the combat of the giants. He knew that all would be lost unless Ellert went into action. As he could see on Harno's exterior face, Onot had finished his experiment although he was unable to determine whether he had achieved success or not as the thought-impulses of the scientist didn't come through very clearly.

Then Onot retreated to his private quarters and laid down. He seemed to have fallen asleep at once. Now is the time for Ellert to emerge again, Rhodan thought. His guess was quickly confirmed.

Perry Rhodan! Can you hear me?

"Holy smoke!" Perry exclaimed in relief. "It was about time, Ellert! What happened?"

Onot was stronger than I – but this has changed now. I've won over his mind and taken possession of his body. Does Harno see me?

"Yes."

Very good, then I can proceed. I'll go now to the transmitter station and set the receiver. How much time do I have left to seek safety? Onot's body must not be destroyed so that his exceptional mind will not be lost. Only he can reveal the ultralightspeed propulsion system.

"Why can't you acquire the necessary information from his brain?" Rhodan inquired, at a loss to understand why Ellert hadn't learned the technical data.

It would be too strenuous for me. How much time do I have?

"If you switch on the transmitter the same moment that the first fighter-robot sets foot on Druufon, you'll have exactly 5 minutes. That's when Lt. Potkin will activate the transmitter on Hades. It's all ready to go now. Only 5 minutes, Ellert!"

That'll be enough. I'm going to wait till the first robots land on Druufon before I turn on the receiver. I'll have enough time to reach the surface, where I hope to be safe.

"Can't you leave the computer center underground?"

This is possible too. Do you consider it safer?

"Certainly! Harno'll keep observing you. Aren't you afraid that Onot might gain the upper hand again?"

No, not any more! I'll report again to you. Ellert dropped out.

Bell, who had been present during the exchange, muttered: "These telepathic pictures without technical aids fascinate me. They won't burn out a tube."

He glanced at the observation screen of the *DRUSUS* as the ship crossed the battle zone of the opposing formations under concentration of all available energy in its protective shield. It soon passed the most forward ships of Arkon's line-up. "I hope we don't catch up with the 5,000 robots before they land," Bell said.

"Don't worry," Rhodan reassured him. "They must be approaching Druufon now for a landing. If everything goes well . . ."

But everything was far from well.

* * * *

All ships that the Druufs could muster had taken off and engaged in a mortal battle with the invaders. However this was only a part of the defense the Druufs could put up. The flak went into action as soon as the huge spherical intruder emerged on the horizon and turned into a landing path around the planet.

At first they thought that it could be Rhodan's spaceship and they hesitated to open fire. But the High Command quickly received the information from a reconnaissance ship that Rhodan's vessel had been sighted behind the advancing fleet of their foes, then crossed the battle lines and now neared their planet.

The High Command instantly gave orders to attack the foreign transgressor who apparently attempted to land on Druufon for some obscure purpose.

The first salvos of the energy-cannons were deflected by the protective shield of the spherical colossus and flew off in all directions. But then they concentrated their fire on one spot which caused the protective shield to collapse. The energy-rays went through and found their target, the vulnerable hull of the attacker.

Now a spectacle took place. The ship began to rain robots.

The pre-programmed war-machines leaped from all hatches into the flaming depth. Each one was provided with an antigrav regulator and protective field projector. However these defense screens offered little protection and crumbled quickly under the massive energy-rays, although they were designed to withstand minor attacks without damage.

Built-in power-drives reduced the orbital speed of the robots which were soon caught in the strong gravitation effect of Druufon. But the power-drives kept performing their job and steered the robots away from uninhabited areas so that they landed in the capital or near the capital, if

they landed at all.

The formidable defense machine of Druufon functioned faultlessly. One robot after the other was shot down and spun out of control until they plunged into the planet where they blew up in an atomic explosion. Others fell into the ocean and sank out of sight. Several moved around crazily. Their power drives no longer followed their programmed path and kept accelerating at fantastic speeds, hurling the robots out into space where they were pursued by torpedo-crafts and destroyed.

The spherical ship kept circling around Druufon but it was obvious that it was no longer able to maneuver. It drifted on its path, balanced by gravitational and centrifugal forces and was easy prey for the pursuit ships which took quickly after it and turned it into a wreck. Thereby it became apparent that it was not even manned by robots.

Yet in the meantime a few robots managed to touch down on Druufon. As soon as they had solid ground under their feet, their powerful weapon-rings went automatically into action. They began to fire in all directions and spread horrible devastation around themselves until they were silenced by the energy-cannons.

It seemed that the ruse of the aggressors to incapacitate the inner defenses of Druufon on the ground had misfired and the Council of 66 felt happy – until the news of the disaster struck.

* * * *

However, 10 seconds before the catastrophe took its toll an announcement was broadcast to all radio stations on Druufon by Rhodan's powerful sender. The stations recognized his signal and plugged in the translators, which made Rhodan's message intelligible.

CALLING ALL DRUUFES! THE ROBOTS ARE PLANNING AN ATTACK ON YOUR PLANET! LOOK OUT FOR A SHIP WITH 5000 FIGHTER-ROBOTS! THEY AIM TO DESTROY THE COMPUTER CENTRE. I AM RUSHING TO YOUR AID. LET ME LAND ON YOUR SOIL! RHODAN, TERRA.

This was the text of the message received all over Druufon and it was immediately passed on to the central council. The Council of 66 was disconcerted for a few seconds but it had no time to deliberate any measures.

As soon as they had grasped Rhodan's warning and wondered why it had come too late, a volcano erupted in the depth of their planet.

Onot awoke. He rubbed his 4 eyes and sat up.

When did he fall asleep? Right, he had conducted his experiment and determined that it was perfectly feasible . . .

Those disgusting headaches again. Maybe they caused him to feel so terribly tired. He tried to ignore his pains as he had some very important business to finish. The Council had to be notified of the long awaited result.

Or did they . . .?

Suddenly it didn't seem to be quite that urgent. There was something else which required his attention even more. Over there at the transmitter station . . .

He rose awkwardly and swayed a little on his heavy column-like legs with a feeling of insecurity.

The electro-glider transported him through brightly illuminated and gleaming corridors to his destination. The matter-transmitter, an excellent test model, was located in the center of the Science Department, which was also the heart of the computer center itself.

Onot slowly climbed out of the glider and began to walk. He didn't like to walk but he had no other choice. The station was situated at some distance from the main corridor and could only be reached by narrower passages.

His headache bothered him considerably and he felt that it affected the accustomed clarity of his thinking. What was it that he wanted to do at the station?

He didn't know and didn't care to think about it further. Why should he? Something . . .

Another Druuf walked up to him and silently asked Onot: "Did you hear it, Onot? The aliens have taken the offence again. It's about time that they get a taste of your new weapon."

"New weapon . . .? Oh, the time-freezer. Yes, you're right. But I've got to hurry . . . I don't have any time now . . ."

The Druuf looked baffled at Onot. "No time? What do you want in my department anyway?"

"I must . . ." Onot paused. Well, what did he have to do? If he could only remember!

"You must do what?"

"The transmitter! Is it ready for receiving . . ."

“It’s always ready. All you have to do is turn on the switch. What’s on your mind? This is no time for experiments. I don’t know if the sender is functioning too. The attack of the robots . . .”

“Did the robots attack? Have they already landed?”

The Druuf glanced at Onot with increasing astonishment. “Where did you get that idea? Not a single robot has landed. Their ships are attacking us, that’s all. But they’re manned by robots.”

Somehow Onot felt a sense of relief although he didn’t know why. Only after the robots arrived on the surface of Druufon was he supposed to activate the transmitter. And then he would have 5 more minutes to save himself.

“That’s what I meant,” he replied and walked on. The other Druuf couldn’t get over his puzzlement and followed him with bulging eyes before he got on his way again. Why should he worry about the whims of the chief physicist as long as he didn’t bother him and stuck to his own affairs?

Onot entered the station and made sure that receiver was ready for operation. He could have switched it on immediately but there was still a danger that somebody else might come in and shut it off again. This had to be avoided if possible. There would still be 5 minutes before the arrival of the robots, during which the station would be unguarded.

Onot shuddered. Robots? What did he know about robots?

He must have gone completely out of his mind. Why was he here? Didn’t he have enough other things to do?

He suddenly felt the pressure growing in his brain and then experienced a sensation as if his own intellect had been pushed aside. And this wasn’t all, because now he heard the voice for the first time as it silently said: “I can’t help it, Onot! But now I must tell you who I am and that I’ve shared for many months a place in your body. I’m stronger than you and you’ll have to obey me from now on – unless you want me to leave you and take your life with me.”

Onot was nearly frightened to death. He didn’t believe in supernatural shenanigans but this silent and persuasive voice was no hallucination. It was as real as himself. “What . . . where are you?”

“In you, Onot. I’m an intellect like you but I’ve lost my body. I’ve found you after wandering restlessly through time and I’ve helped you to build the time-freezer. Don’t you think this is a good reason to be grateful to me?”

“I still don’t understand . . .”

“Call me Ellert, Onot. Someday you’ll understand everything but if you don’t you must die when I leave you. However we don’t have time to waste right now. Turn on the transmitter in exactly one minute!”

“The receiving station?” Onot struggled against the thought of obeying a stranger, especially a ghost. “I won’t do it unless you tell me why I should.”

“If you refuse to obey me, I’ll be compelled to force you. I’ve gained control of your body, your nerves and your muscles. I can make your heart stand still, Onot! You’ve got exactly 30 seconds.”

The time was expressed in units of the Druufs. Onot felt his right hand lift up. It approached the lever which would release the flow of energy to the grid. He gave his brain the command to lower his hand again but it continued to reach for the lever.

“It’s useless, Onot,” came the somewhat sarcastic impulse from Ellert. “Furthermore it’ll be wiser of you to obey me because pandemonium will break loose in here in 5 minutes. You must reach a safe shelter before then if you wish to go on living. I can save myself because I can exist without your body.”

The hand touched the lever, hesitated a moment and then depressed it. It immediately started a vibration of the receiver, a sign that it was in operation.

“And now let’s get out of here, Onot! Move your tired legs and go to the glider in the main corridor. We can be miles away in the next 5 minutes.”

Onot began to run against his will. He would have liked to know what connection the robots had with the transmitter but he was far more worried about the problem of his invisible enemy who had taken possession of him. Would he ever be able to get rid of him?

He flung his entire weight into the glider. The streamlined cabins ran on electronic rails which connected the subterranean stations and the various departments. They reached a velocity of more than a 1000 kilometers per hour.

Onot pushed the drive-lever into full speed. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes.

Ellert isolated Onot’s brain and made contact with Rhodan. *Transmitter is set!*

“At least 50 of the robots that have landed are still functioning,” Rhodan

advised him. "As soon as the fireworks in the computer center start popping they'll assume that they have managed to storm it. I've already broadcast my warning to the Druufs and I'm going to land there. Keep in touch, Ellert!"

Onot was 80 kilometers away from the computer center when the ground under the city began to shake. But he could hardly feel it because he had surfaced already by the time the shockwave reached him.

* * * *

Capt. Rous and Lt. Potkin waited tensely near the transmitter. The apparatus was set so that the push of a button sufficed to activate it. The picture screen flickered unsteadily. It reflected the electrical disturbances of the twin sun Siamed. It was tuned in on Rhodan's frequency. His orders could come any moment.

More than 40 robots stood waiting in the energy cages. They were programmed to start their work of demolition at the same instant they emerged in the computer center of the Druufs to deliver their charges of energy till it was completely spent and then to self-destruct in the holocaust.

Rous was biting his lips. "Damn it! How much longer will it take them?"

Potkin remained outwardly calm, as was his custom. "There's nothing we can do about it. Rhodan must know why he is still holding back. This offensive against the Druufs requires the interaction of artificially created incidents. Our own action is also timed to correlate with these incidents and we shouldn't come in too soon or too late."

"Yes, yes, I know," Rous grumbled angrily. His temper seemed to get the better of him. But this time he wasn't alone and he couldn't make his own decisions. This was one of the reasons the always-calm Potkin had been assigned as his aide.

The picture screen suddenly began to move and showed a face.

"Rous! Potkin! Are you ready?"

"Say the word!" Rous exclaimed, his hand reaching for the button.

"Contact in exactly 10 seconds," Rhodan replied quietly.

Potkin admonished Rous with a glance. "5 seconds to go . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . *now!*"

Capt. Rous slammed his fist on the button and when he looked at the energy cages they were already empty. He had sent a veritable inferno on a

trip.

When he looked back to the picture screen, Rhodan's face had disappeared.

* * * *

Rhodan had no illusions about the risk he took when he came in for a landing on Druufon.

The remnants of the Arkonide fighter-robots could be seen lying around everywhere. The concrete – or whatever the Druufs used in its place – was dotted with innumerable craters but there were no spaceships in sight. The entire fleet was locked in the battle with the invaders, trying to destroy or repulse them.

The *DRUSUS* touched down.

Somewhere in the city was a tremendous detonation which caused a shockwave to sweep across the spaceport. They saw a pale flash in the light of the midday sun. A dark cloud of smoke rose lazily and drifted to the open land.

"And you want us to get out into this," Bell asked dubiously. "If they ever find out that were behind this . . ."

"By the time they discover it, we'll be far enough away," Rhodan said nonchalantly. He didn't feel quite as confident as he pretended. The Druufs could have smelled a rat since his warning had come 10 seconds too late. "Why would they get the idea that we're playing a trick on them?"

Pucky waddled over to them. "On the contrary, they're glad that we're here," he reported. He probably had monitored the thoughts of the ruling Druufs by telepathy and must have known what he was talking about. "At the moment they're racking their brains how it was possible that some of these robots got into the computer center where there had been some fighting."

Harno floated down from the ceiling and turned himself into an observation screen. *Take a look at the computer center of the Druufs!*

They did as he suggested and were able to observe the events which took place deep below the city. The robots spilled out of the transmitter and began their devastation. Others must already have been farther inside because continuous pressure waves raced through the corridors, cracking the walls wide open. The detonations caused the generators and entire machinery halls to collapse. Luckily for the Druufs the computer center was mostly run automatically so that only little loss of life occurred. The

destruction was limited to the technical installations which fully served the purpose.

“Thank you, Harno. We’ve seen enough. Our plan was successful. The Druufs are now deprived of their scientific institute and it serves them perfectly right since they have used their knowledge preponderantly for military purposes. We’ve hit their most vulnerable spot and I expect their war machine to collapse. The only question is when.”

Atlan, who had been standing silently in the background, took a step forward and looked at Rhodan with earnest eyes. “I hope it won’t be after Arkon’s fleet has been gutted. One of these days we’re going to need that fleet badly.”

Rhodan looked the other way. “That’s my hope just like yours, Atlan. But there is no other possibility of defeating the Druufs without weakening the Regent, unless we want to attempt both jobs by ourselves. And you know as well as I what the result would be.”

Atlan sadly shook his head. Harno ascended to the ceiling again and waited.

“I’ll take Bell and Pucky with me,” Rhodan said. “In case of an emergency we may have to be rescued by teleportation.”

“I can carry both of you together,” the mousebeaver said, not without arrogance or justification. He had proved on more than one desperate occasion that he could teleport two people at once. “Of course, one is much easier but I can handle both of you. But Bell and his belly count for 1½.”

“I’ve lost almost 5 pounds during these last few weeks,” Bell protested. He was rather sensitive in this respect. “That ought to lighten your burden.”

“Big meal!” Pucky exclaimed. “As if 5 pounds would make any difference with you! You probably took it all off in the wrong place anyway.”

Bell shook his head and padded his belly. “Right here.”

“Oh . . .!” Pucky stretched his words. “That’s good. I thought it was up there!” He pointed to Bell’s head.

Before Bell could grab him, Pucky jumped out of his reach.

Rhodan interrupted the horseplay of his two friends. “We’ll leave the *DRUSUS* the regular way, through one of the airlocks without taking weapons along. Sikerman, call the Druufs on the radio. I want to talk to Tommy-1 as soon as you can reach him.”

Tommy-1 was a reference name for the translator of the Druufs. The names of the Druufs were so unpronounceable that they were incapable of being

articulated by Terrestrials.

Sikerman and the chief radio officer Lt. Stern undertook to establish communications immediately and it didn't take two minutes before Sikerman was able to report: "Contact, sir! Go ahead!"

Rhodan spoke into the mike of a translating machine which was connected to the radio sender. "This is Rhodan speaking. We've come in our flagship and wish to negotiate with you although you have failed to treat us in good faith in the past. But the attackers are getting out of hand. We need your help as much as you need ours."

"They have dropped robots on the city and some of them forced their way into our subterranean nerve center. Can you stop them? We're too busy with the air defense and the struggle in space."

That's all I need! Rhodan was taken aback for a moment. Then he said hesitantly: "Don't you have any ground-troops that can be deployed against the intruders? We've got only 3 ships available here and we would have to ask for reinforcements. This would take much too long."

There was a pause. Pucky concentrated his thoughts and tried to read the mind of Tommy-1. "They're trying to come up with something," he reported.

"Come to us!" they were finally requested by the translator. "We would like to talk it over with you."

"I'll come with two advisers," Rhodan agreed and told Sikerman to switch off the transceiver. Then he turned to Bell. "It's all set, pal. Let's go!"

He picked up a multi-purpose wristband which also contained an efficient transceiver. It would enable them to call the *DRUSUS* whenever necessary and even if they were unable to use it there would still be Pucky and Harno.

Harno? Rhodan looked up to the ceiling. "You better come with us too, Harno. Perhaps you can be of assistance if you join us."

The black ball floated down obligingly and was put by Rhodan into the pocket of his pants. There Harno was in a safe place. Rhodan had a certain idea how the strange being could help him – if the occasion arose.

Once, after they had alighted and walked the short distance to the city, they were surprised by the foray of a small Arkonide pursuitship. The 20-meter-long torpedo-shaped craft must have broken through the defenses and dived with the death defiance of a mobile robot on the target that it must have considered an enemy. Fortunately it was caught in an energy beam of an anti-aircraft gun. The glowing cloud drifted awhile over the city and was

soon blown away by the wind.

“If that wasn’t lucky!” Bell growled, and hastened his steps. “I’d like to know why they don’t send us a car.”

He barely had uttered his desperate wish, when a vehicle approached from the edge of the landing field. It was long and streamlined. Apparently it was steered automatically. As soon as it stopped in front of them the doors opened by themselves.

Rhodan got in, followed by Bell. Pucky was the last to jump on the wide seat. “Are the Druufs really so broad-beamed?” the mousebeaver wondered as he sank into the upholstery and almost disappeared. “These seats fit somebody like Bell just fine but as far as my delicate physique is concerned . . .”

“Stifle yourself!” Bell said irately. “The mass your body lacks I’ve got in my brain.”

He was interrupted by Rhodan. “I’d watch the way if I were you so that we can find your way back or your big brain won’t help you much. Over there is the forum of the Council where they’ve already tried once before to put me on ice. I think they’re already familiar with Pucky.”

“Who in the Galaxy doesn’t know Pucky?” the mousebeaver exclaimed enthusiastically.

Bell stared in the direction Rhodan had pointed. “A fine trap! And we have to go in there?”

“I guess so,” Rhodan replied.

He seemed to be right. The vehicle glided up on an inclined elevated street and sped above the buildings of the city on a wide road toward the dome-shaped edifice. When they had come within 100 meters of the forum, a door opened to let them enter.

They stopped in the middle of the arena. The benches around them were occupied to the last seat. It was amazing how many Druufs remained idle in the city while a decisive battle raged for their planet.

Rhodan was the last to climb out, letting Bell and Pucky alight first. He did not bring a translating machine, knowing the Druufs had excellent instruments of this type themselves.

His assumption was justified. They had made arrangements for every Druuf in the forum to follow the negotiations.

“We thank you for your warning, Perry Rhodan of Terra,” a voice resounded from the ring of columns which supported the cupola.

“Unfortunately it came too late but it has proved to us on whose side you stand.”

Rhodan tried to locate the speaker but it was impossible to find him. The ruling members had again taken the seats in the uppermost row, which ran around in a large circle 50 meters above the arena. Any one of the members could have been Tommy-1.

“I’m ready to hear about the measures you have to propose to me,” Rhodan stated coolly. He had no intention of helping the Druufs, being only interested in obtaining the secret of the supra-lightspeed propulsion system. “What can we do?”

“Bring in your forces and throw them into the battle with the robot fleet,” Tommy-1 replied. “Destroy the machines that are ravaging our scientific institute under the city!”

“Don’t you have an army to take care of them?”

“All our soldiers have been sent out to take part in the space battle. There are only politicians, scientists and officers left behind, and they are incapable of fighting.”

“Why can’t the officers fight?”

“Not these,” was the inscrutable answer.

I found Tommy-1, Pucky signaled telepathically. Shall I bring him down from his rostrum?

Not a bad idea, Rhodan responded. Maybe it’ll make the desired impression on them.

Pucky didn’t have to be told twice. He had pinpointed the spokesman of the Druufs and knew which of the monsters had thought the words they had just heard. He concentrated his mind on the colossal figure who sat up close under the ceiling and seized him in his telekinetic stream of power. As though he had suddenly become weightless, the ponderous Druuf, almost 3 meters tall, slowly floated up into the air and over the balustrade until he was suspended above the center of the arena.

A unison outcry of astonishment reverberated from the amplifiers. In reality the Druufs didn’t scream since they communicated by way of an organic sender and receiver inside their bodies with which they produced ultrasonic waves. However the application of the translating machine made the impulses they emitted audible for human ears.

Tommy-1 remained remarkably calm. Although he thrashed around with his arms and legs, these movements were probably instinctive reflexes. To

be sure, he was unable to understand what had happened to him but there was no time to grasp for an explanation. If he were to fall down all of a sudden, he would be dead beyond any doubt.

But Pucky didn't let him drop like a stone. He made the Druuf perform an elegant loop and descend leisurely from his height, to safely stand in the arena before Rhodan.

"It's easier to talk to one another like this," Rhodan said in a loud voice, hoping that the translating apparatus would function equally well under the altered conditions. This turned out to be true.

"How did you do it?" was the first question Tommy-1 asked. "It was as if an invisible hand had held me."

"It was mine," Pucky enlightened him, proudly slapping his own chest.

The Druuf stared goggle-eyed at the mousebeaver from his big mouse-ears down his full length to his broad beavertail. He seemed to be especially fascinated by the flashing incisor which betrayed Pucky's hilarious mood.

"That?" Tommy gasped. "Who's he?"

"That's Pucky," Rhodan introduced him, "and you better be nice to him or he'll drop you like a hot potato next time."

Tommy-1 couldn't take his eyes off the mousebeaver but now his gaze expressed respect or fear, exactly which, was a little hard to tell. But Pucky, who could also read his thoughts, was happy. "Splendid!" he said, nudging Bell. "Now he thinks I'm one of the gods." He whispered so softly that the translating machine didn't pick it up.

Rhodan addressed the Druuf again. "What do I get in return if I help you."

"Are you demanding a reward?" Tommy-1 seemed to be honestly amazed. "I thought our enemies are yours as well. Why should we compensate you if you're fighting your own enemies."

"Have it your way! In that case I'll let you fend for yourselves."

"Wouldn't it benefit you also if we defeat them? We could ask you for a reward by the same token."

Rhodan was well aware that the Druuf was right. But this was beside the point at the moment.

"I'll have to tell you something which might make you think this over," Rhodan said in an ominous tone. "The robot race has offered me an alliance. If I accept it it'll be the end of you. Or do you believe you can fight both of us at the same time?"

Tommy-1 seemed stunned. His eyes sought help from his brethren and he

hoped to receive advice from them. The jabbering voices suddenly fell silent as the translators were switched off.

“They want to consult with each other,” explained Pucky, who never neglected his surveillance. “You scared the wits out of them.”

“That’s just what I tried to do,” Rhodan, murmured.

Bell didn’t move. He watched the long rows of monsters who looked down on him and gave him a creepy feeling. To be on the safe side, he began inching closer to Pucky.

Rhodan raised his left hand a little and pressed the button of the tiny transceiver. “Hello, Sikerman?”

“Sir?”

“Is everything under control? What does it look like?”

“There’s nothing out of the ordinary going on as far as the *DRUSUS* is concerned. But there are violent explosions in the city. It seems that heavy fighting has broken out there and deep craters indicate that whole subterranean sections have collapsed.”

“Thank you,” Rhodan replied, leaving the set on and turning to Pucky. “Are they getting anywhere?”

“As far as I can tell they can’t come to an agreement. They’re still deliberating what they should offer us as reward.”

“We’ll soon have them where we want them,” Rhodan smiled..

They waited another 10 minutes during which the job of demolishing the computer center probably had been finished by the rampaging robots. Then the translators were turned on again.

Tommy-1, who had retreated a few steps, returned. “What do you want us to give you for joining the fight against the robots instead of siding with them?”

Rhodan’s face looked impassive as he declared: “You possess a type of spaceship propulsion system which is unknown to us. We leap in transitions through hyperspace whereas you fly through without dematerialization at ultralightspeed. If you hand over the blueprints for this propulsion system, we’ll reject the proposition of the robots.”

Tommy-1 consulted again with his people. His four eyes were completely devoid of any expression when he finally announced: “We agree to give you the construction plans after the robots have been defeated.”

Rhodan had expected something along this line. The Druufs would have to be brainless idiots if they had relinquished their most valuable secret

without restrictions. He therefore had to be patient. Perhaps it would be possible for Ellert to get hold of the plans in the meantime.

He slowly nodded his head although he was convinced that the Druuf would be unable to understand the meaning of the gesture. "This is a fair enough proposition. But I'm warning you, Tommy-1, if you entertain any notions of double-crossing us . . ."

"We keep our promise just as you keep yours," was the ambiguous answer by Tommy-1 and Rhodan was none too happy when he heard it. "When you have achieved your victory you'll receive the plans for the ultra-light-speed propulsion system. Will you now take action?"

"Very good. Are my ships guaranteed safe passage in their lane of approach?"

"They'll be able to pass without being intercepted. We'll give you a code which will be recognized by all our units."

"And what if the computer center is knocked out?"

"It's not the only one we've got although it was the most important one."

Rhodan had to hide his surprise and disappointment. Apparently he had underestimated the Druufs. If they had other such research institutes, their battle reserves were not yet exhausted, perhaps for a long time to come. Maybe they even had more than one Onot in their scientific ranks.

It was a fear which was confirmed in less than a few seconds.

"Shall we try to repulse the robots under the ground?" Rhodan inquired.

"That won't be necessary," Tommy-1 replied. "They're lost anyway. A special squad will turn the gravo-burner on all the other robots. It has been developed by . . ." here followed an unpronounceable name, ". . . this should be the end of our opponents inside our universe."

"Gravo-burner?" Rhodan asked uncomprehendingly. He couldn't imagine what he meant. "What's that?"

"The translating machine doesn't use precise scientific terms. It applies figurative symbols whenever it lacks the commensurate expression. The gravo-burner is a weapon against which there is no defense – unless you know the weapon itself. I'm not a scientist and can't explain to you how and why it functions. All I know is that it disturbs gravitational relations. It burns up gravity."

"This is utter nonsense!" Bell broke in in disgust, thinking that the Druuf was trying to bamboozle them. "Even if the effect of gravity has been eliminated, this is no disaster. Each ship can generate its own gravity field

and compensate for such a loss.”

Tommy-1 turned to Bell and said: “Perhaps I’ve failed to express myself accurately. The gravo-burner counteracts the effect of artificial gravitation fields and it reinforces at the same time the magnitude of planetary gravitation. Even the most powerful ships can’t resist the attraction and will be caused to crash. The pull of our twin-sun can be increased 1,000 fold. Only a shield of special amalgamations can protect against it – and our own ships have it.”

Rhodan was still unclear but he suspected that the Druufs had made decisive progress in the exploration of stellar gravity fields. He used a few seconds of the pause to picture in his mind what would be the result if Tommy-1 didn’t lie.

But why should he lie?

The artificial gravity fields of Arkon and Terra’s spaceships served to maintain the customary gravitational environment and were also used for preventing the deflection of the navigational course in the vicinity of planets. If the ship approached a world with extremely high gravitational force, the magnitude of the antigrav field was increased till it compensated for the excessive pull. If the gravity of such a planet were to be multiplied 1,000 times without any means of neutralizing the augmentation, the ship would undoubtedly crash into the planet. In such a case the regular propulsion system would be insufficient to carry it out into free space again.

If the Druufs owned such a weapon, they would be unbeatable and it baffled him why they had not yet deployed it. He wondered whether Tommy-1 would answer a straightforward question. “Is the gravo-burner still in an experimental stage?” Rhodan asked cautiously. “Is its effectiveness limited to only one time-plane?”

“Yes, unfortunately. That’s the reason we haven’t brought it out yet. The robots remained in their own universe with the exception of a few minor forays and the gravo-burner doesn’t function there. It’s another proof of the relation between gravitation and time, that it can’t surmount the obstacle of different time-planes.”

Rhodan began to regret that such a race had to be his enemy. They seemed to have attained a knowledge which expanded the frame of traditional concepts.

A connection between gravitation and time?

He quickly returned to the sobering presence. “If you command such

tremendous weapons why do you require help from us?"

To this the Druuf had a logical answer. "Within the frontiers of our own universe we can master any foe if he doesn't strike with the advantage of surprise as has unfortunately been the case. The source of our calamity is not located in our universe but in yours and I must admit that many of our technical weapons fail to operate beyond that barrier of time."

"The time-freezer too?"

"What do you know about that?"

Rhodan realized that he had made a mistake. In order to rectify it he felt compelled to reveal one of his secrets. "My companion," he said pointing to Pucky, "is a telepath. He can read thoughts and he came across several references to it."

"Telepath?" the Druuf wondered. "We don't have any persons who can read the mind of others. What else can your little friend do?"

"You just found that out on your own body. He's the one who brought you down from your seat up there."

Pucky waddled a few steps toward Tommy-1 and yelled shrilly and furiously: "Didn't you hear just now that I'm a telepath? Why are you scheming to seize me because you could use me for your own purposes? How would you like to zoom through the air and let me drop you in nothing flat? You sneaky devil, you better beware of Pucky!"

Tommy-1 flinched when he saw that his thoughts had been unmasked. "I merely thought . . . because of . . ."

Rhodan used his chance to tone down the troublesome controversy. "So you'd prefer us to take on the enemy in our universe while you try to tackle him here yourselves. Did I understand you right?"

The Druuf twitched his triangular mouth and Rhodan noticed for the first time that the Druufs used their mouths for expressions similar to human gestures like nodding or shaking heads.

"Yes. This is the proposition we're putting to you. We want you to attack the robots on their own grounds and destroy their logistics. This is all we expect you to do."

This was a sensible suggestion if they had such a formidable weapon as the gravo-burner but had to use conventional weapons in the Einstein universe.

"Agreed," Rhodan declared. "I'll give our battlefleet the necessary orders. Now we have to get the code signal which will enable us to return safely whenever it becomes necessary."

Tommy-1 waved one of his powerful arms. The door behind Rhodan, Bell and Pucky opened again and a car pulled up. "It'll take you back to the spaceport."

Without another word the three friends entered the vehicle which then moved out to the open road and rapidly increased its speed. The *DRUSUS*, which was waiting undamaged on the badly pockmarked landing field at the edge of the city, came into view down below.

Rhodan said with satisfaction, "Now we know their strength and their weakness. But it worries me that they're strong enough to defeat Arkon in this region. If they use that fantastic weapon it can bring Arkon down to its knees."

The silence that followed was shattered by Pucky's high voice which struck like lightning as he proclaimed: "As surely as I can read Tommy-1's mind, the Druufs have no such thing as a gravo-burner. That invention exists only in his imagination."

5.

SECRET REVELATIONS

When the streamlined cabin-glider stopped and Onot got out, all lights went out in the subterranean corridors and everything was plunged into total darkness.

He felt his way along the wall and tried to find his way out. He was not very familiar with this area of the underground network because this department was run by other scientists. However Onot as the chief physicist of his race had the authority to demand admission anywhere.

“What happened?” he asked, subdued, hoping that his invisible companion would give him an answer. Without him he no longer knew what he was doing here.

“The computer center under the capital has been destroyed. Can you find the way to the surface?”

“It must be fairly close but if the power has been cut off it’ll be a difficult hike.”

“The emergency power will soon begin to function,” Ellert consoled him sardonically. “Sometimes it’s better if you don’t have a body.”

Onot didn’t reply. He continued groping his way in the dark until the light suddenly flickered and then became steady. Now he was able to proceed faster and soon oriented himself.

Before he reached the elevator he suddenly heard hasty steps which quickly came closer. Two Druufs appeared and they stopped in astonishment when they saw Onot. “Onot?” one of them exclaimed. “What are you doing here? What’s going on in the city?”

“We’ve had an attack by the aliens,” Onot explained and was about to describe the details when he suddenly paused. Could he tell the two scientists that he himself had admitted the enemy into the computer center? How would they take it? Would they believe that he had acted under force? “On the city, Onot?”

Onot pulled himself together. He had to be very careful so that he didn’t make them believe he was a traitor. “No, on the computer center. The aliens landed robots in the city. Although most of them were shot down, some of them managed to get into the computer center. I was lucky to find a glider and escape one step ahead of them. There was nothing I could’ve

done against the invaders. I was alone and unarmed.”

“Aren’t you working on a new weapon?” one of the Druufs asked suspiciously. “It had been rumored that . . .”

“There wasn’t time,” Onot interrupted him hastily. “I’m glad that I got away with my life. The entire computer center has been demolished.”

“Is all the equipment smashed too?”

“As far as I could tell, yes. It’s a heavy loss for us. I don’t know what the Council is going to do about it.”

“If the situation is as bad as you describe, we’re lost.”

Onot denied it although he didn’t do it of his free will. Ellert had ordered him to do so. “We’ve got other research and development institutions with excellent scientists and we’ll be able to beat our enemies. Now don’t keep me any longer, I’ve got some business to take care of.”

“At our place?” the Druufs inquired, puzzled.

“Yes,” Onot replied and hurried on. He now knew where he was and was anxious to reach the surface as quickly as possible. The elevator was operating again. The antigrav stream quickly carried him up and he sighed with relief when he saw the brilliant twin-sun Siamed again.

By contrast to the far-flung and complicated subterranean installations, the surface of Druufon resembled in many parts a bleak wilderness. The capital was one exception and there were other cities along the shores. But the nerve center of the Druufs was deeply hidden beneath the crust of the planet.

Suddenly the ground shook and Onot would have fallen down if he couldn’t have held on to the wall of the elevator building. Several Druufs came running across the empty square, rushing toward Onot when they saw him. “What happened?” they cried, revealing their lack of information about the situation. “Is it an explosion or a trembler?”

“Both,” Onot retorted, avoiding further discussion because his invisible master had told him to refuse all information. “There’s no cause for alarm, though.”

He twisted his triangular mouth as an agreeable gesture and strolled away as if taking a leisurely walk. The Druufs looked at him in awe. If such a famous scientist failed to show any anxiety, there was no real danger to be feared and so they returned to their work.

And now go as quickly as you can to a safe place! The order was given silently to his brain. *Your secret laboratory! Don’t tell anybody where*

you're going. We're going to conduct a little experiment together.

“You demon – is there anything you don't know?”

I know everything, Onot!

The chief physicist began to move again. He felt tired and longed for rest and sleep.

There were a few remote-controlled vehicles parked on the square. He selected one of them, got in and turned on the energy. Onot marked his destination on a card in the dashboard and the vehicle began to roll. Then he leaned back in the comfortable cushions and asked: “How did you learn about my secret lab, ghost?”

I know all that is in your thought and memory, Onot. I know it all from you. You are incapable of keeping secrets from me no matter how much you try to guard your thoughts. We're one, Onot. Can you hide something from yourself?

Onot gave no reply. He looked straight ahead where after a turn the mountains came into view. There, under massive rocks, was his laboratory, an old abandoned test site which he had accidentally discovered some time ago. He had fixed it up and spent many a day here, when the Council believed that he was absent on a vacation trip. Onot had better things to do than relax on holidays.

The road was very bad but it didn't matter. The car was suspended on elastic cushions which smoothened out all bumps. The speed increased when the road became straight again.

“What do you want to do with me?” Onot finally asked.

Now the voice of the unknown was loud and clear as if he spoke next to him. “Don't ask questions, Onot. Be glad that you didn't remain in that inferno – because that's what the computer center is, a hell. There's nothing left for you, even if you wanted to go back. But this is impossible for you now. Somebody saw that you have activated the transmitter.”

Onot was shocked to death. If this was true . . .

“It *is* true,” Ellert insisted with emphasis. “It was that Druuf whom you met on the way out. He became suspicious and wanted to know what you had done in his department. Luckily he left the transmitter on since he couldn't know what would happen. But he made it back to the surface and at this moment he's standing before the Council to report what he had seen. You, Onot, are considered to be the worst traitor of your people.”

Onot felt as if his entire world collapsed all at once. “Why did you do this

to me? Wasn't it enough that you've forced me to commit such a terrible crime? Does everybody have to know it too?"

"It had to be, Onot! It's better this way." Ellert didn't explain why it was better. He knew that Onot wouldn't dare to go back and that it would be safe to leave him alone for a few minutes. The mountain was still half an hour away and it was time to get in touch with Rhodan again.

* * * *

Rhodan didn't say another word on their way back to the *DRUSUS*. He tried desperately to figure out why the Druufs had shunned his assistance on Druufon and pretended to possess superior means which, in truth, they didn't have. If they were bluffing him with the gravo-burner, other inventions might also have been a figment of their imagination.

How about the time-freezer? Or the ultralightspeed propulsion system?

But no, Ellert would have known and he had confirmed the existence of the 'star-drive' and the time-freezer. At least these devices were no tricks.

The *DRUSUS* towered above them. A hatch opened as they alighted from the car, which swung around in an elegant curve to return to the city. Without a word, and each mulling his own thoughts, they let a tractor-beam seize and carry them up into the vessel.

Bell broke the silence only after they had reached the Command Centre. "I don't understand a thing anymore."

Sikerman looked up. "What happened? I've listened in and I thought . . ."

"But you couldn't hear what they thought," Rhodan pointed out. "Pucky did though."

Sikerman and Atlan were given an explanation. The Arkonide raised his eyebrows and murmured, "Highly interesting. These Druufs are very bold. They risk everything by bluffing us. They know exactly that they'll be the losers if we can find their weak spot. On the other hand they stand to gain everything if they're lucky. I don't understand though how Tommy-1 could take such a risk if he knew that Pucky is a telepath."

"He learned that only when it was too late," Rhodan smiled. "He was in a great hurry to send us off when he became afraid that we could see right through him and fortunately we were able to do just that."

"Pucky can't be kept in the dark," the mousebeaver bragged.

Bell gave him a fleeting look but refrained from uttering an opinion. He was cautious enough not to think about it either.

“And now?” Atlan asked with great interest.

Before anybody could reply, Ellert’s thought-impulses blotted everything out. They superimposed themselves on their own brainwaves, which seemed to be exposed to a powerful sender.

I was able to flee from the shambles in Onot’s body and I’m now on the way to his secret laboratory. There, I hope I can obtain the blueprints for the star-drive on microfilm. So far I didn’t get an opportunity to talk about it with Onot. How are you making out?

“Everything is under control,” Rhodan said in a loud voice. “Are you ready to leave Druufon and go back to Earth with us?”

There was a laugh of regret in their brains. Not yet, Perry. I must stay here until I’ve gained the assurance that I can act freely. Onot’s body is very convenient for me. Besides, I’ll never be able to secure the plans for the star-drive if I leave Onot’s body too soon.

Atlan made an approving gesture.

They were right. Ellert could come back to Earth any time he thought the time was right. At the moment it was more important to get the plans for the star-drive. “As you wish, Ellert. We’re going to take off now and depart from Druufon. The Druufs have lied to us. They claim they can defend themselves in their own universe and we needn’t worry about them. They pretend that their scientists have developed such superior weapons that they can dominate everybody in their whole universe. However they’ve admitted it wouldn’t be that easy in our world. What do you know about this?”

Nothing as yet but I’ll soon find out, Ellert replied. *I must break off now because we’re getting close to the mountains. As soon as I get hold of the construction plans I’ll contact you again.*

The pressure was lifted from their brains.

“I wonder if he can get in touch with us when we’re no longer in the time-plane of the Druufs,” Bell worried.

“I think so,” Rhodan said. “But he’ll have to quit Onot’s body to pass through the alignment funnel. If I understand it right, Ellert can freely move through space and time wherever and whenever he wishes. But heretofore he was unable to go from one time-plane into another so that he couldn’t find his way back to Earth and the present.”

“I hope he won’t go astray again,” Bell kept worrying. “When the gap between the two worlds is closed again, his way will be blocked.”

“He’ll cross in time,” Rhodan replied and turned to Sikerman. “Get ready to start the *DRUSUS*, Lieutenant Colonel! We’re going to display some spectacular fireworks to the Druufs so that they’ll get some enjoyment out of their new allies.”

Two minutes later the gigantic ball soared straight up into the early afternoon sky and crossed unmolested the ring of defenses the Druufs had thrown around their home planet. Then the ship accelerated to speol and disappeared without a trace or structure disturbance in hyperspace, to materialize again in the same second on Hades where it was berthed in the subterranean hangar.

* * * *

Onot clumsily left the vehicle and walked toward a cliff. He had never encountered a single being in this vicinity but today he couldn’t get rid of the feeling that he was being watched. Nor had he ever had a guilty conscience and it was no surprise that he didn’t understand the symptoms it produced.

Responding to the pressure of his hand, the smooth door of stone, which concealed the entrance, slid to the side. There were steps behind it leading deeply into the dark. Onot fingered the sidewall and put on the light. Simultaneously the steps began to move downward.

“You’ve made yourself a nice little hide-out here,” Ellert admired with a touch of sarcasm. “Nobody’ll find you here, not even the police of the Council.”

Onot winced visibly. “If it comes to the worst I can always tell them the truth – that you have forced me to turn on the transmitter.”

“It’ll be very interesting to see whether they’ll believe your story about an invisible ghost.”

Onot gave no answer. He felt glum since he knew very well how unconvincing his assertions would sound. He, the respected scientist, had ruined the computer center. There couldn’t be any excuse, not one!

“You’ve got me in your power,” he finally admitted sadly. “What else do you want?”

“Just a few little things, my bosom companion. For instance the ultra-lightspeed propulsion system for spaceships, the time-freezer field-generator . . .”

“Why? Didn’t I commit enough treason?”

“You don’t get the picture, Onot,” Ellert replied. “Don’t forget that I’ve helped you to develop the time-field. I know how it can be produced but I need precise instructions on audio-visual tape, microfilm if possible. In addition I must have the construction details of the star-drive on microfilm. As soon as you hand both of these over to me, you’ll be free of me and you can do whatever you please.”

“You don’t give me a choice,” Onot replied, tired and hopeless. “You’ve ruined me.”

Ellert hesitated for a moment before answering. Then he proposed to the Druuf: “Maybe it won’t be as bad as that, Onot. If you cooperate and do everything I tell you I’m willing to prove your innocence to the Council. It would be very easy for me.”

“How?”

“By telling them myself that I compelled you to do everything against your will. I can communicate with them exactly in the same manner as with you and this’ll convince them beyond any doubt. “You’ll be able to return to the city – provided there’s still something left of the city.”

Onot sighed with relief. “Alright. I’ll do anything you ask.”

A second door blocked the passage. He opened it like the first one by putting his hand on a certain spot.

Onot had furnished his laboratory with excellent equipment. Here he came to ponder the secrets of physical laws and to design new methods. Ellert was already familiar with the lab since Onot had spent much time here during the past months. This was also the place where he had devised the time-freezer.

Ellert looked – using Onot’s eyes – at the small experimental model in the corner of the lab. Since the computer center was destroyed, there was only this one generator left in existence. The model rested on a base and was no bigger than a medium-sized suitcase. Of course it was not connected to the energy source but such aggregates were available anywhere.

“Do you keep the microfilm here?” Ellert asked.

“No, why should it” Onot retorted.

“It would’ve made our work much easier. How can you give me the instructions to build the star-drive if you don’t have any microfilms?”

Onot didn’t know the answer.

“But you’re familiar with the details of the propulsion system, aren’t you?” Ellert tried to make sure.

“Of course, although I didn’t invent it myself. I can explain everything to you.”

“That isn’t the problem. I need drawings, formulas and documents. Not even a ghost could retain in his mind all the details which are required for the star-drive system. Do you have any suggestions?”

Onot had none although he was suddenly very interested in helping his uncanny companion. Besides, it wasn’t enough to secure the microfilms alone. He would need other instruments such as cameras, copiers and projectors, etc. It wasn’t as simple as Ellert had assumed.

“Alright, we’ll have to find another way, Onot. Just sit down and rest, first of all. Then you can tell me a little about the principle on which the ultra-light-speed drive system is based. Maybe it’ll help me to accomplish something.”

Powerless to resist, Onot began to reveal the secrets of his people.

* * * *

The light cruiser *CALIFORNIA* was also a spherical spaceship. It had a diameter of only 100 meters but its power of acceleration was remarkable. The ship could reach the speed of light in 5 minutes on a straight flight. Tremendous antigrav fields neutralized the reaction to its thrust.

Capt. Marcel Rous issued the last instructions for the start and then the *CALIFORNIA* shot out from its subterranean hangar and into the black sky of Hades.

Rhodan stood next to Atlan in the operation center of the cruiser as it swooped down on a formation of the Arkonide Robot Regent’s fleet. Several of the Druufs’ ships were poised in the vicinity and witnessed the attack. Rhodan knew that he faced only ships that were manned by nothing but robots and that their destruction would be limited to a material loss.

Almost at the same time as the surprise attack, the Regent received a short message by hyper-radio on Arkon, informing him tersely that everything was going according to plan. Much to his regret, Rhodan was forced to destroy a few more of Arkon’s ships but he would make absolutely certain that not a single life would be sacrificed.

The 10 small cruisers of the Regent put up a desperate defense but they succumbed to the superior firepower of the *CALIFORNIA*, and the Druufs, waiting in the background, didn’t have to join the attack. The Druufs reported Rhodan’s victory to Druufon, where it aroused surprise and a little

hope, which was just what Rhodan wanted.

The *CALIFORNIA* raced through the alignment funnel, performed a thorough patrol flight and shot down a remote-controlled reconnaissance ship from Arkon. Then it headed back for Druufon. A squadron of blockading ships, piloted by the descendants of insects, came into view. It flew back and forth before the cleft, approaching the velocity of light. The curves described by the ships were millions of kilometers long.

Capt. Rous radioed the code signal and the *CALIFORNIA* was permitted to pass without being intercepted, which made Rhodan breathe a little easier.

Rhodan turned to Atlan and said: "That's what I wanted to know, Admiral. Now you can take the *DRUSUS* to Grautier and bring back reinforcements. Hades will be made into a dominant base but we'll also dig into other planets. The Druufs will soon learn that they can't get very far by force or trickery. As soon as Ellert presents us with the star-drive system, we'll make common cause with Arkon and strike against Druufon. Does this put your mind more at ease now?"

"It does – as far as Arkon is concerned. But do you really believe the Druufs won't get wise to what we have in store for them? We can't go on building bases on their planets without expecting them to find it out sometime."

"I'm not so sure that they would," Rhodan shook his head. "It'll be out of the question as long as they don't have the means of penetrating our absorption barrier."

Atlan withheld further comment and maintained his silence until the *CALIFORNIA* submerged into the hangar of Hades.

Rhodan left the ship and went to see Potkin. "I'm going to take a little trip on the surface. During my absence it'll be your duty, Lieutenant, to carry out all orders from Bell as if I had given them myself. I guess you can let me have a spacesuit from your stock?"

"What are you getting into, sir? The surface . . ."

"Never mind, Potkin! I'm just going to take a little stroll."

"I hope you don't want to go alone. I can pick a few men who . . ."

Rhodan shook his head. "I'm not going alone. Stop worrying about me! A good friend of mine will be accompanying me."

"Pucky?"

"No," Rhodan answered with a smile as he slipped his hand into his pocket. "Harno."

Onot put down the scribe which he had used to make the intricate drawings and write the involved formulas. He sighed. "It's more complicated than I thought. But perhaps you'll be able to understand the principle of the thing."

An uninformed observer would have beheld an eerie picture. Sitting all alone at a table in his lab, surrounded by a variety of gadgets and instruments, the Druuf kept turning his 4 eyes toward the ceiling when he spoke as if his partner were up there. Then he listened inwardly and gave another answer. The stranger would have thought that Onot had gone crazy and was talking to himself.

"I've got no trouble understanding the principle," Ellert repeated. "But it's not enough to make the detailed specifications for the construction superfluous. We need a microfilm recorder. Maybe we have to go back to the computer center once more."

"But . . ."

"No, don't worry. I'll leave you here and go by myself. If there's anything still left intact over there, I'll get myself another Druuf and make him transport the recorder over here. Then I'll let him forget everything and go back as if nothing had happened."

Onot suddenly leaned back. "What was that?"

Ellert had noticed it for some time but he had tried to ignore it. He considered it to be one of the usual thought-impulses which were normally present. But suddenly the impulse became unmistakable and identifiable. Was Perry Rhodan around? The impulse was strong and close.

Ellert isolated Onot and put the mind of the Druuf to sleep. Now he was able to take over his body completely and to assume control of his nerve centers without his knowledge. He did it and Onot promptly became Ellert.

He got up and went to the door which led out to the corridor. When he cautiously opened the second door which led to the surface, his fear of a trap diminished. Undoubtedly it was Rhodan who stood a few meters away in the light of the sinking sun, dressed in a pressure-suit with his helmet removed and dangling at his side.

Lying on the ground next to him was a 10-meter-long cylinder of metal with a diameter of 3 meters. A mini-spaceship!

Ellert/Onot came out and offered Rhodan the heavy hand with the flexible fingers of the Druuf. "Welcome, Perry! You don't mind if I call you Perry,

do you?”

It was the first time that Ellert and Rhodan met again in person, although the former was not in his original physique.

“You always called me Perry as an invisible ghost,” Rhodan grinned, “why not now as a Druuf? Aren’t you a little surprised to see me?”

“I should say I am!” Onot’s lips moved and the human sounds seemed to come directly from his mouth. The illusion was so perfect that Rhodan couldn’t tell whether Ellert communicated by telepathy or if he could really hear his words. “I suddenly sensed that you’re calling me. How did you find me? Nobody knew I was here.”

“Harno helped me a little,” Rhodan replied with a chuckle.

“Harno?”

“You’re going to meet him. I believe you’ve got many things in common. But first one question: can you finally leave Druufon?”

Onot shook his head. “Definitely not before I’ve obtained the drawings for the star-drive system. It’s not that simple although I know it in theory. I still lack the microfilm documents which you would need for the job on Earth. Onot can get them for me.”

“Can I help you in any way?”

“No. This material is only known to a Druuf. We can only hope that it won’t take too much time.”

“What about the time-field?”

“You mean the time-freezer? I don’t have any accurate drawings for it either. However it’s less critical in this case. First of all I’ve helped to develop it and secondly, there’s a small experimental model standing in the lab. I’ll try to take it with me later on.”

“How would you do that? Isn’t it simpler if you give it to me now?”

Onot made a gesture which probably was meant to register surprise and Rhodan thought he could detect regret in Ellert’s ‘voice’. “Why didn’t it occur to me sooner? You came in a spaceship, didn’t you? Of course we can put the model in it and you can take it along. Your scientist should be able to analyze it and put it to work. I can explain everything else about it later. Just be careful that nobody gets caught in the projection of the time-field. Although it wouldn’t hurt too much if it’s shut off immediately.”

“Alright. Can you bring the model here or is it too heavy?”

The Druuf distorted his triangular mouth and Rhodan guessed that Ellert tried to indicate visually a smile. “Too heavy? Do you have any idea how

strong a Druuf is, Perry?”

Onot turned around and walked back to the door of the underground lab. Before entering he turned around again and ‘smiled’ at Rhodan. He glanced at the tiny spaceship and shook his head in astonishment. Then he disappeared.

Smiling in amusement, Rhodan followed him with his eyes. Suddenly he spun around. Several small points had appeared on the horizon and quickly came closer. It was a squadron of agile pursuitships on a patrol. It could have been a coincidence that they happened to pass over this mountain. But maybe not.

He leaped into the open hatch of the airlock which closed again before he reached the pilot seat. By the time the 3 pursuitships of the Druufs had reached the spot where he had been, he was already high above them.

The Druufs had watched his maneuver and changed their course. Despite their great speed they couldn’t keep up with the little scoutcraft of the Terranian fleet and they were hopelessly left behind.

Rhodan reduced his speed and gave the pursuitships a chance to catch up with him a little. The mountains where Onot’s lab was located were now far behind him and he could see the ocean in front of him.

His sonar instrument showed the depth of the water to be 500 meters. This would be more than enough for his purpose.

The 3 pursuitships were gaining on him now and soon began to fire from all barrels. The glistening energy-beams flowed away from the protective shield of Rhodan’s craft. Then his little ship began to sway and went into a spin before it fell like a stone into the depths. Finally after a last try to straighten out, so it seemed – it dipped into the ocean.

The Druufs crisscrossed the ocean and kept a close watch for any survivors that might emerge from the rolling waves. After 10 minutes they zoomed skyward with whining engines and disappeared in the direction of the continent.

Meanwhile Rhodan had travelled a great distance under the water. It was another occasion to appreciate the fact that these tiny craft were designed to move in more than one medium, if not with the same velocity. Harno made the navigation instruments quite unnecessary for Rhodan. On his curved surface he observed the three Druufs give up the search and fly away.

He grinned when he pulled his ship up and shot out of the water like a flash of steel, vanishing seconds later in the colorful sky. When he landed again a few minutes later at the entrance of Onot’s lab and climbed out of the

airlock with Harno in his pocket, he had almost forgotten the short intermezzo.

Onot had not yet returned but he didn't figure that it would take much longer. The Druufs had been led by the nose. They probably believed that they had intercepted a reconnaissance ship of the robot fleet and brought it down with success. He would be the last one to make them change their opinion. How much longer would he have to wait?

Soon he sensed that Onot/Ellert was coming back. The Druuf had to make a great effort since Ellert prodded him repeatedly not to slacken on the way. Then Onot stepped out of the door, carrying a weighty box of metal on his strong arms which he quickly put down.

Rhodan studied the block with great curiosity as Onot said: "This is the first experimental model of the time-freezer. It functions perfectly when you plug it into a source of energy. You must take it to Terra, Perry. I'm sure that the scientists on Earth can do something with it in case I'm not back before then."

"Thank you," Rhodan replied and pointed to his ship. "I hope we can load it in together."

"I can handle it," Onot said and lifted the box up again. Laboring hard, he pushed it into the opened hatch and gave it one last shove. "It looks a little tight for you but the flight back won't take you long. The ship looks very fast."

"That's true," Rhodan nodded. "I'll take off now and I'll send this model to Terra at the first opportunity."

"And I'll see what I can do about the star-drive system," Onot promised. "I'm going to try today to go back to the computer center under the city and find the necessary microfilm record or look for it any other place it might be kept."

"Good luck, Ellert!" Rhodan said, shaking the hand of the Druuf. "If you can't separate from your friend Onot you can come – if need be – to Earth in his body later. We won't object to him. Just let me know!"

"I'll contact you again, Perry. And as far as Onot is concerned, I'll give it some thought. I feel sorry for the poor devil."

Onot opened the door again long after Rhodan's little ship had slipped behind the clouds which were colored by the sinking twin-sun. Onot cast two distinct shadows but he paid no attention to them and he slowly descended to his retreat inside the rock.

The storm, which almost continuously raged in the twilight zone of Hades, had let up a little. The red and green configuration of the twin-sun hung low above the horizon like a glowing monstrous phantom. The thin atmosphere made the sky look dark although the sun was shining. Several big stars were visible in the firmament.

A long chain of mountains stretched nearby and offered a measure of protection against the storm. The highest peaks glittered reddish white. It must have been frozen atmosphere. Farther behind was the icy nocturnal side of the planet.

Long cracks and deep fissures were drawn on the stony surface where no soil had as yet been able to form. As a result it also lacked any vegetation whatsoever. Deep down on the bottom of the gorges, where the light of the sun never reached, were puddles full of ice. Hades was a world where no life could exist without artificial means. Only in the twilight zone was it possible to survive for perhaps half an hour without a spacesuit. The air was thin but breathable as long as physical work could be avoided.

Something began to move close to one of the cracks. The rocky ground shifted and a hole appeared in which a platform rose up, carrying two living beings.

Bell and Pucky wore heated spacesuits of radically different styles. The little mousebeaver looked almost comical in his suit but he was inordinately proud that he sported a special outfit whereas Bell had to wear the run-of-the-mill suit.

The platform stopped and the two friends stepped out into the murky light of the barren planet. Their helmet radios were turned in.

"What a primitive elevator," Bell griped, pointing to the platform. "Rather old-fashioned and clumsy. I'd give something for a modern antivibrator."

"You can't have everything," Pucky retorted brightly. "I'm glad we didn't have to climb the stairs." Pucky looked around. "I'd like to know where Perry went. Lt. Potkin said he used the elevator too."

"This is the only one we've got," Bell murmured, glancing at the colorful twin-sun with curiosity. "Perhaps he went for a walk. We just have to look for him."

"Look for him here? That's easier said than done."

There were thousands of places to hide out in the rugged landscape – if a person wished to do so. There were countless rocks and boulders lying

around between the crevices. There were steep formations rising up and an abundance of small narrow ravines. It was impossible to decide where to look first.

“He should be able to hear us when we talk with each other,” it occurred to Bell. “He’s got the same radio in his spacesuit as ours.” His voice changed as he shouted: “Hello, Perry! Why don’t you speak up! Are you playing hide-and-seek with us?”

“He didn’t even give a hint what he was after out here,” Pucky complained sadly. “He never failed to take me along before.”

“He must have had a reason to keep you out of his hair this time,” Bell said with a mean streak.

Pucky reacted sharply. “If you don’t shut up, I’ll put you through the wringer.”

Bell clammed up. Somehow the idea of being at the mercy of the mousebeaver on this desolate planet didn’t seem to be so attractive. He scoured the bleak landscape with his eyes and when he peered along one of the craggy ridges up into the purple-black sky his gaze suddenly became fixed. Was that a star?

Pucky noticed Bell’s confusion and began to scan the sky as well. True enough, there was a faintly gleaming point moving from the sky toward the surface. It moved much too slowly for a meteor but for a spaceship . . .”A ship!” Bell exclaimed. “By all the craters on Mars, a ship! But it couldn’t be one of ours!”

Pucky responded, “You’re right as far as the ship is concerned: we don’t have one with a shape like that here. It’s much too small.”

“It looks like a space pursuitship, only smaller,” Bell murmured. “I hope it isn’t a Druuf.”

“It wouldn’t fit a hippopotamouse like that,” the mousebeaver decided, taking cover behind a big rock since the little ship moved in at a fast clip with the apparent intention of landing, of at all places, at the entrance of the subterranean base. “Get moving or this buzzard – whoever he is – will turn you into a cloud of energy.”

Bell hit the ground and crawled over to Pucky to seek cover. “What makes you think that?” he asked breathlessly.

Pucky glanced at him quizzically. “I mean it certainly would be worthwhile,” he said and peered over the top of the rock. He saw to his horror that the ship had already landed. Suddenly he began to giggle

absurdly when he received a thought-impulse. He got up and walked out into the open with a slow stride.

“Pucky!” Bell winced, terrified. “Man, are you out of your mind! Get back!”

“Thank goodness I’m not a man,” the mousebeaver rejected the insult and kept waddling to the hatch of the mini-spaceship. There he waited and called back to Bell: “You can come out of hiding, you coward,” forgetting that he was the one who had sought cover in the first place, “it’s only Perry.”

But Bell treasured his life too much. He anxiously watched the mousebeaver and the strange, completely unknown ship. Where had Rhodan got it? Had he found it here on Hades?

The hatch opened. Rhodan emerged and at once noticed Pucky, who waved to him with a grandiose gesture.

“Oh . . . it’s you!” Rhodan greeted him. “How did you get here?”

“On the elevator,” was Pucky’s simple explanation. “But what’s more interesting, how did you get here?”

“In this ship,” Rhodan countered, jumping nimbly to the ground due to the light gravitational force of the planet. “Good that you’re here; you can help me.”

“Anytime!”

“I’ve got a box in the ship. Let’s take it off.”

“Physical work?” Pucky shuddered. “No, I’ve got a better idea.” He turned around and yelled in the direction of the nearby rock. “Bell! Somebody wants you over here!”

Bell pricked up his ears when he heard Pucky’s call. He got up and recognized Rhodan and instead of an answer he walked over to join them. Then he asked: “A box? Very interesting. And what’s in that box?”

“Drag it outside and you’ll see!” Pucky chirped.

Rhodan put his foot down. “Will you two hotheads please stop squabbling and give me a hand? That thing weighs a few hundred pounds – at least it would weigh that much on Earth. Here it’ll be much lighter.” He turned around and climbed back into the hatch. “Well, what are you waiting for now?”

“This is a strange construction for a spaceship,” Bell murmured and began to follow Rhodan. “Never saw it in my life. Looks like a fantastic product but I like its aerodynamic lines.”

Bell entered the hatch of the little ship behind Rhodan. His eyes widened when he saw the shiny metal block. "You expect us to *lift* this thing?"

"I've told you already that the gravity on this planet is only one third of ours. We can handle it easily, even without Pucky's help."

"That beast is a shirker when it comes to work," Bell grumbled, badly irritated. "It would be so easy for him to do it telekinetically."

"I'll put him to work later. First I want to get this box out of the ship."

They managed to unload it in a few minutes. When the shiny box of pure metal finally rested on the inhospitable surface of Hades, Pucky appeared on the scene again. He thoughtfully looked at the block and commented: "I notice that you're shielding your thoughts from me, Perry. I suppose you don't want me to know everything. Oh well! But can you tell us at least what's in that metal box?"

"The model of a time-freezer," Rhodan answered quietly. "I got it from Onot."

"Do you mean to tell me that he let go of it just like that?" Pucky asked in astonishment.

"It was really Ellert," Rhodan added by way of explanation. "And now would you be so kind as to teleport this model to the *DRUSUS*, if the vessel is here. Otherwise put it in the office of Capt. Rous. I'll be there with Bell."

Bell stopped examining the model. "Now that you've answered Pucky's question," he stated with injured feelings, "would you please have the courtesy to satisfy my curiosity as well?"

"Oh my, the convoluted manner in which he chooses to express himself!" Pucky mocked as he sat down on the model of the time-freezer in order to establish the physical contact required for the teleportation. "I'd keep him dangling a bit."

Rhodan smiled mischievously. "Now let's ask him first what he wants to know. Please, Reggie, ask your question!"

Bell took a deep breath. "Where did you find this ship? It's the first time that I've seen anything of this type. You didn't dig it up on Hades, did you?"

"Of course not," Rhodan shook his head. Then he turned to the mousebeaver. "Do you also wish to claim that you've never laid eyes on such a little spaceship like this?"

"Never did," Pucky confirmed. But all of a sudden he became a little dubious. "At least I can't remember that I did."

Suddenly Rhodan began to laugh. "And I always imagined that each of you knows all our different models by heart and is able to identify each one of them. I'm awfully disappointed in you. It's hard to believe that you don't know what this is." He pointed to the 10-meter-long metallic cylinder. "This is one of the auxiliary ships of the *DRUSUS*. Almost all our big cruisers are equipped with similar auxiliary ships which can hold a few people and reach the velocity of light. But I suppose you've never been involved in an emergency where you had to use one of these ships and I can almost understand your lack of knowledge. Nevertheless . . ."

Pucky furiously gasped for air. He made a vague gesture toward the ship and fidgeted as if he were going to say something. Then he changed his mind – and teleported. He dissolved in the air together with the model of the time-freezer and was gone.

Bell sighed with relief. "Gosh, you really stumped him," he said unctuously and eager to forget the embarrassing interlude as quickly as possible. Of course he knew these auxiliary ships well enough but his fantasy had gotten the better of him again. He didn't want to accept the truth because the sensation of a fairy tale was more beautiful to believe. To find a mysterious spaceship on an uninhabited planet – this had titillated the sense of adventure. But a simple spaceship of Earthly origin . . .! "Well, you can't expect a mousebeaver to be a technical genius too."

Rhodan merely shook his head and decided not to delve further into the matter for now. He walked to the elevator platform and waited for Bell. "You better hurry up if, you don't want to spend the night outside. A night is eternally long here. The sun is so low that it's always night."

Bell took a few steps and joined Rhodan on the platform, which slowly descended into the depths after the stony cover slid across the entrance over their heads. Bell maintained an obstinate silence.

"I guess there's only one thing to do," Rhodan finally remarked after they had reached the brightly illuminated corridor leading to the central staff room. "We'll have to provide a little refresher."

"Refresher?" Bell muttered suspiciously. Now he was sorry that he had so impatiently insisted on snooping around the surface with Pucky. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean refreshing your memory. Starting tonight – Hades time – you're going to set up a course which all officers and men on the base will have to attend. It'll give them something to do in their leisure time. You'll conduct the first lesson."

“Me – teach?”

“Yes, precisely! Your subject for tonight will be *The External Characteristics of Terranian Spaceships*. You can begin with auxiliary ships. Don’t you think that some people will benefit immensely by a thorough review?”

Bell grimaced. “I promise you to stop thinking as of today – if it can be avoided. Tonight? I hope that Pucky’ll be present.”

“You can bet on that,” Rhodan assured him and turned into another corridor.

Bell followed him glumly with his eyes. He’d find a textbook somewhere on a shelf. To teach it from memory —

He sighed deeply. There wasn’t a man in the world who could remember all that stuff!

END

The ship is a Death Ship.

Thora Rhodan is dying.

There is no more life-preserving serum left for her.

The supply has been exhausted, that precious boon for which lives were once risked on Tolimon, location of the secret laboratory of the Galactic Physicians.

The sentimental should not read this story.

Nor those to whom tears come easily.

Nor any of the many legions who love Thora only slightly less than Khrest, than Deringhouse, than . . . Rhodan.

And yet – you must. As a disbelieving generation, long ago in the 6th decade of the 20th century, watched en masse on TV the death and funeral rites of a beloved president, JFK, you owe it to Perry, Darlton, Scheer, the Solar Imperium . . . yourself . . . to witness —

THORA’S SACRIFICE

By Kurt Bran